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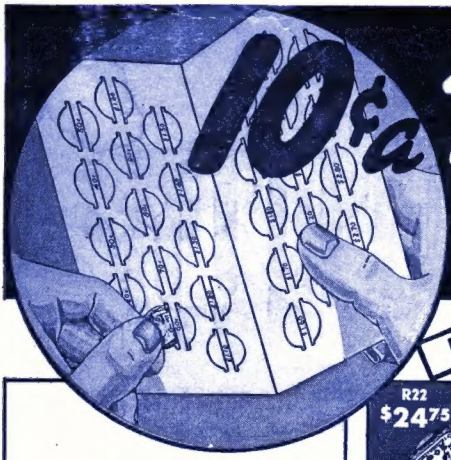

10¢ a Day buys a Watch on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA ELGIN GRUEN KENT BENRUS

Yes—only 10c a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

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FREE TO ADULTS

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R22 $24.75

M17 $24.75

R22 — Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
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L140 — Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 — Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
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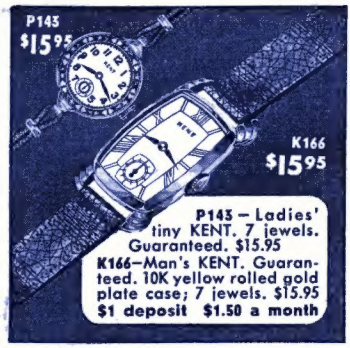

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$29.75 T67

O68 $29.75

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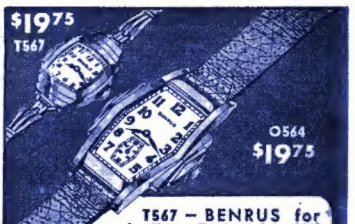
K273 — Service Watch — new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
$1 deposit $1.98 a month



$19.75 T567

O564 $19.75

T567 — BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. $19.75
O564—Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $19.75
$1 deposit $1.88 a month

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Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price $_____. I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance (PLUS FEDERAL TAX) in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

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MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
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"THE BOSS DIDN'T EVEN KNOW MY NAME"

"HE SAID he remembered seeing me around, but he didn't even know my name until the I. C. S. wrote him that William Harris had enrolled for a course of home study and was doing fine work.

"'Who's William Harris?' he asked. Then he looked me up. Told me he was glad to see I was ambitious. Said he'd keep his eye on me.

"He did too. Gave me my chance when Frank Jordan was sent out on the road. I was promoted over older men who had been with the firm for years.

"My spare-time studying helped me to get that job and to keep it after I got it. It certainly was a lucky day for me when I signed that I. C. S. coupon."

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One reason employers recognize the value of I. C. S. training is that many of them are former I. C. S. students. They recognize that "today's I. C. S. students are tomorrow's leaders."

In the 50 years since these Schools were founded, more than $5,000,000 has been spent in preparing and revising texts. A personal, individual method of instruction has been developed. Isn't it better to get the facts now—than to wait five years and wish you had?

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★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X: ★

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City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

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WEST

Vol. 51, No. 2 JANUARY, 1942 Sixteenth Year

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A Complete Book-Length Novel of Range Battle in the Era of Pancho Villa's Raiders

By LARRY A. HARRIS

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PLUS OTHER STORIES

A Complete Book-Length Novel

YELLOW DUST OF EMPIRE

By RAYMOND A. BERRY

When Men Maddened by Greed for Gold Turn to Thievery and Murder, Stan Powell Sets Out in the Service of America to Smash at Doublecrossing Foes in a Blazing Desert Inferno! 15

Other Quick-Trigger Stories

GHOST IN THE IRON BOX...Hapsburg Liebe 99

The Singing Kid Doesn't Like "Sneak Work"

THE SAWBONES STAKES A CLAIM .....Ralph Berard 108

Dr. Rossbird Fights to Stave Off the Reaper

EL MUCHACHO .....Allan K. Echols 114

Sheriff Stubblefield Baits a Trap with Bullets

AND

THE CHUCK WAGON.....Fog Horn Clancy 10

Join THE RANGE RIDER'S CHUCK WAGON CLUB! Coupon on Page 128

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH, MARY. EVERYTHING LOOKS SO HOPELESS
IT ISN'T HOPELESS, BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY RADIO. TOM GREEN IS DOING WELL. TALK TO HIM
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT. RADIO'S STILL A YOUNG GROWING FIELD
TOM'S RIGHT. AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD PAY
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING AT HOME FOR RADIO IS PRACTICAL AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST
SOON I CAN START FIXING RADIOS
THERE'S NO END TO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
OR WORK ON LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS
OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO. MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS! THAT'S $10 EXTRA I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
OH BILL. IT'S WONDERFUL. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME JOB NOW--AND A BRIGHT FUTURE IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operators license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M—— Furniture Co. for their four stores.
JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.

$10 a Week Extra In Spare Time

I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging around $500 a year. Those extra dollars mean so much—the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably.
JOHN WASHKO, 97 New Cranberry, Hazleton, Penna.

In U. S. Signal Corps

I am in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps, as Chief Radio Clerk. My duties also include maintenance of the transmitter and receivers when the Chief Radio Operator is absent.
R. W. ANDERSON, Radio Station WTI, Vancouver Barracks, Washington.

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in your spare time for a* GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, Pres. National Radio Institute Established 25 Years

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make $5, $10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make $30, $40, $50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

Why Many Radio Technicians I Train Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

Beginners Quick! Learn to Earn $5, $10 a Week Extra In Spare Time

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2A09, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2A09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Do *You* Smile at the Idea of Learning Music by Mail?

Here Are Some Facts That May Surprise You!

YOU HAVE undoubtedly heard of the U. S. School method of teaching music by mail. This remarkable system of instruction has been in operation for over forty years and more than 700,000 people in all parts of the world have enrolled for it. Men, women and children of all ages and from all walks of life have taken up their favorite musical instruments this convenient, money-saving way. They have studied the piano, violin, guitar, accordion and, in short, every kind of popular instrument.

No Special Talent Required

Many of these pupils did not know one musical note from another when they enrolled. Many had previously tried other methods of instruction without success. And not a few were frankly skeptical. They doubted whether it was possible to learn music by mail, just as you may doubt it.

To some of these "Doubting Thomases" it came as the surprise of their lives when they actually heard themselves playing. Simple popular melodies at first, then more and more advanced pieces, all the way to Grand Opera.

One after another, pupils testify to the amazing ease with which they learned, and the fascination and pleasure they found in the lessons. They say it was "easy as A. B. C."—"so simple that a child could understand"—that "with all the wonderful photographs and diagrams to guide you, you simply cannot go wrong"—that "it's really fun to learn music this easy, fascinating way."

Will You Accept This Challenge?

The experience of thousands upon thousands of people should be proof positive that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument by the famous print-and-picture method of the U. S. School of Music. Is it not a pity, then, to deny yourself all the enjoyment, the good times and popularity that music offers? Do you not owe it to yourself, at least, to examine all the facts, and to decide, once and for all, whether you can afford to pass by this opportunity to enrich your life with music?

If you really want to play a musical instrument—if you are willing to devote just a few minutes a day to learning, not through tedious, old-fashioned practice, but by actually playing real tunes—then you should mail the coupon at once. It will bring you an interesting illustrated booklet and free Print and Picture Sample that tells all about this wonderful way to learn music at home—without any special talent—without any previous knowledge of music at amazingly little cost. Read it carefully and earnestly and act upon it. If interested, tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.) Address: U. S. School of Music, 2941 Brunswick Building, New York, N. Y.

(Established 1898)

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As a special accommodation to our students we can supply instruments at a special discount. Liberal terms extended. For particulars, inquire Instrument Dept.

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Violin	Hawaiian Guitar	Cornet	Ukulele
Guitar		Trumpet	Organ
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Saxophone			

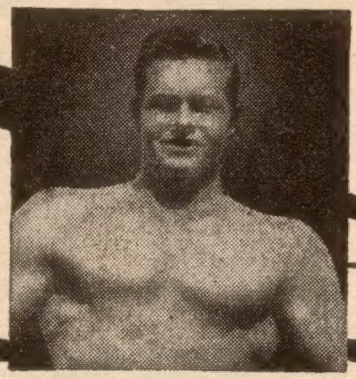
Name ..... Do You Have Instr? .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

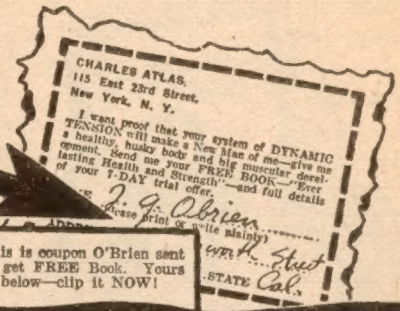
☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

HE Mailed This Coupon



J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner

This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.


CHARLES ATLAS,
115 East 23rd Street,
New York, N. Y.
I want proof that your system of DYNAMIC TENSION will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your FREE BOOK—"Everlasting Health and Strength"—and full details of your 7-DAY trial offer.
J. G. O'Brien
(Please print or write plainly)
STATE Cal.

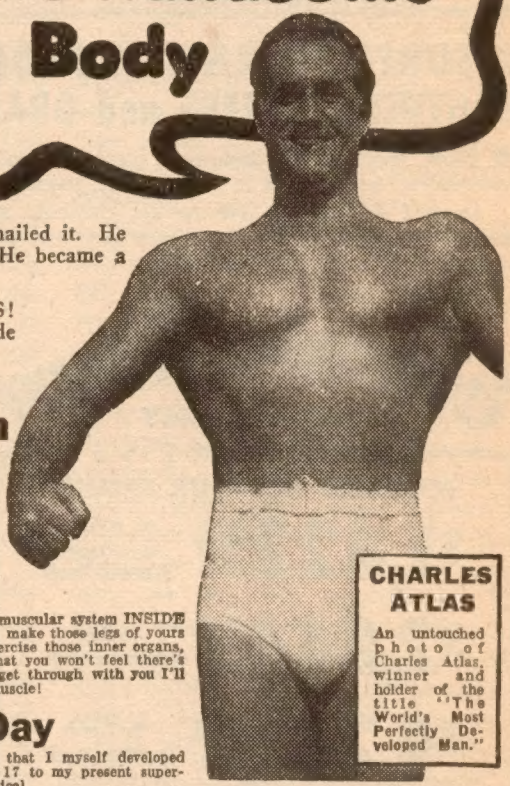
This is coupon O'Brien sent to get FREE Book. Yours is below—clip it NOW!

...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! *'Dynamic Tension'* WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"

J. G. O'Brien.



CHARLES ATLAS
An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, winner and holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"I'll Prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN"—*Charles Atlas*

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE; I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

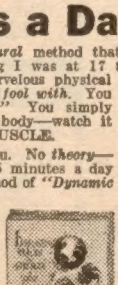
Only 15 Minutes a Day

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical *natural* method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—*my way.* I give you *no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.* You learn to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension."* You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No *theory*—every exercise is *practical.* And, man, *so easy!* Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK "EVERLASTING HEALTH AND STRENGTH"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE.
CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77-N, 115 E. 23rd St., N. Y. C.



CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 77-N, 115 E. 23rd Street
New York. N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" can help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." No obligation.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

One LIFE INSURANCE POLICY INSURES YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY!

TOTAL COST

Only $1 A MONTH

PAYS FOR ALL

INSURES PARENTS, CHILDREN (Married or Unmarried) BROTHERS, SISTERS and GRANDPARENTS . . . Ages 1 to 65

★ Now, modern life insurance methods make it possible for *all* of your family, including in-laws, to be insured in one policy paying guaranteed benefits for death from any cause.

Instead of issuing five or six policies to include mother, father, sons and daughters, even grandparents, we now issue just one policy that insures them all . . . and at one low cost price of only $1.00 a month.

Guarantee Reserve

FAMILY POLICY

INSURES FROM 2 to 6 MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY

$1,422.00	For Natural or Ordinary Accidental Death
$2,844.00	For Auto Accidental Death
$4,266.00	For Travel Accidental Death

The figures shown above represent the insurance provided by the policy on a typical average family of five persons.

GUARANTEE RESERVE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
DEPARTMENT 17-A, HAMMOND, INDIANA

NO AGENT WILL CALL
10-DAY FREE INSPECTION OFFER
SEND NO MONEY

COMPUTED ON LEGAL RESERVE BASIS

To guarantee payment on each death that occurs in your insured family, we have figured this policy out on the strict legal reserve basis, complying with State government requirements in every respect. This is your assurance of *Cash When You Need It Most.* Claims are paid at once . . . without argument or delay. State records verify our fair and just settlements.

Guarantee Reserve specializes in full family coverage, that's why we can offer safe, guaranteed life insurance on your whole family at one low price of only $1.00 a month.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

To eliminate costly doctor fees, etc., we have eliminated Medical Examination. All people from age 1 to 65, in good health may be included in this new type Guarantee Reserve family policy. No membership fees, no examination fees, no *policy* fee . . . $1.00 a month pays for one policy that insures all.

RUSH—MAIL AT ONCE—DON'T DELAY

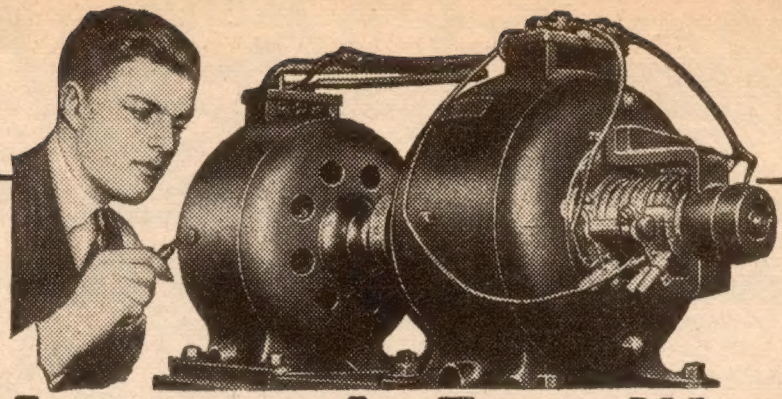
Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE CO.
GUARANTEE RESERVE BLDG., Dept. 17-A, Hammond Ind.

Gentlemen: Without obligation, please send me at once complete information on how to get your Family Life Policy for FREE inspection.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... *State* .....



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I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

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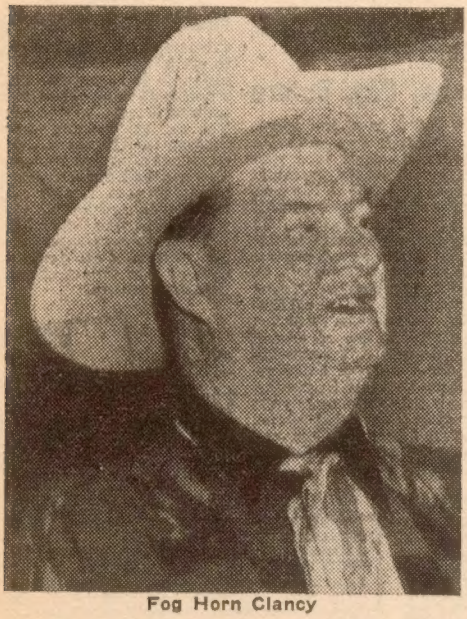
America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

WELCOME, waddies, again to the Chuck Wagon, and if I have not lost my knack of dishing the grub, this should be on a par with a big juicy porterhouse steak, because at this time we are back near Broadway, on that patch of make-believe prairie or Western corral, Madison Square Garden, and we are getting ready for the 16th World's Championship Rodeo.

I always like to come to New York for the Garden Rodeo, because this is the place where the top hands from all over the country come to try their luck and to try to win the big prizes, and if they have that luck they generally heel themselves pretty well with cash for the winter, because the prizes here are bigger than anywhere else.

There are some of them that usually are here, or have been here in the past for several years who will not be here this year. Rose Davis is one of them. She won third in the cowgirls' bronc riding last year here, but in January while starting back West fell off a train near New Brunswick, New Jersey, and was killed.



Fog Horn Clancy

Frank Y. Dew of Dewalt, Texas, down near Houston, is another who will be absent. Frank was not a contestant, but a big cattleman and rodeo producer who always visited the rodeo here, but he has gone on to the last roundup. He was started on the trip by a bullet from the gun of Lucyle Richards, who in that case was the woman scorned.

A Big Season

The JE Ranch Rodeo, of which Col. Jim Eskew is owner, closed a season of eighteen weeks, with the last stand being at the Eastern States Exposition at Springfield, Mass. The business, according to Col. Eskew, was about forty per cent bigger than last year, and there were turnaway crowds at five of the eighteen stands, but the same condition seems to have prevailed at nearly all the rodeos this season.

It has really been a fine season, and I think will go down in history as the biggest rodeo season ever.

Inside the Walls

What is advertised as the "World's biggest inside the walls rodeo," was held in the Oklahoma penitentiary at McAlister, September 20th and 21st, the contestants in all the events except calf roping and bulldogging being inmates of the penal institution.

The rodeo there this year was held as a memorial to its founder, the late Jess Dunn, who was warden and who was killed during a break of inmates on August 10th.

The prisoners in getting in shape for the big rodeo, invented what they called a stir horse, a substitute bucking horse for conditioning the riders.

The contraption was made of an empty oil drum covered with a mattress, and suspended on chains from four iron posts. When husky prisoners grab the chain and start heaving, the stir horse bucks like a row boat in a storm at sea.

It is claimed that the riders of the stir horse got all the motion of a real bucking

bronco, and many of them were thrown as violently as if they had been trying to ride a real bucker in a real rodeo.

Among the Injured

Bill Parks, of Gordon, Nebraska, suffered a broken back just before the start of the rodeo at Mineola, New York, September 9th. Bill was unloading a truck of rodeo equipment when the endgate fell upon him. He was rushed to a hospital, and, after a plaster cast had been placed around his body, was able to be back on the grounds, able to sit up and walk a little, but the old cowboy got around like a deep-sea diver in a diving suit.

Bill, according to the physician will be forced to wear the cast for about six months, but Bill, in all probability, will be with the rodeos again within a couple of months, and will probably act as judge, timer, or engage in some of the light jobs around the arena before he undertakes bulldogging and calf roping again.

The Empire Fair Rodeo

The Midland Empire Fair Rodeo staged in Billings, Montana, August 11th to 15th, drew big crowds and was a success financially. J. W. Currie is president, H. L. Fitton, secretary, L. J. Cremer, arena director, Herman Linder, and Joe Orr, judges. Fred H. Kressman, timer, and Jack Story, announcer.

Among the contracted performers in trick riding were Ken Williams, Paul and Marie St. Croix, and the same in fancy roping. Stock was furnished by L. J. Cremer, and the horse winning the title of best bucker was "Hell to Set." The final results in bronc riding were: First—Bob Boden; Second—John Tubbs; Third—Bill Mcmacken, and Fourth, Wally Lindstrom.

In the bull riding, Buck Wyatt, one of the greatest Negro riders in the game, won first place, Bob Murray and Vidal Garcia tied for second and third place, and Frank Marshall won fourth place.

In the calf roping finals Earl Moore led the field to first place, Buck Standefer was second, Roy Lewis third and Don Hoffman, fourth.

In the steer wrestling, Oral Zumwalt was first, Bud Spillsbury, second, Joe Mendes, third, and Dick Herron, fourth.

Michigan Event

The Michigan State Fair Rodeo staged by Geo. Adams, the first week in September, had a fatal accident on the first day, when Geo. Daniels, well-known rodeo contestant, and former husband of Doris Haynes, cowgirl bronc rider, suffered fatal injuries when bucked off a bronc. Funeral services were held in the rodeo arena and the body shipped to Bonaparte, Iowa, for interment.

Junior Eskew, son of Col. Jim Eskew of the JE Ranch Rodeo, and wife, the former Mary Louise Randolph, daughter of Sheriff Floyd Randolph of Ardmore, Oklahoma, are now Mama and Papa. The baby, a girl, christened Mona Louise, was

(Continued on page 126)

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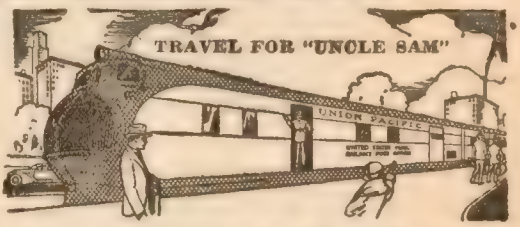

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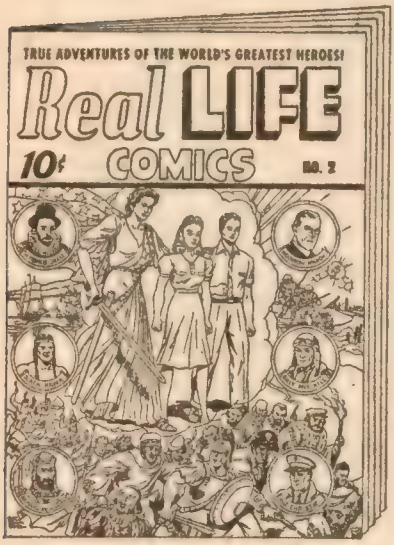

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The venomous head disappeared in a gush of flame (Chapter VIII)

Stan Powell Sets Out in the Service of America to Smash at Doublecrossing Foes in a Blazing Desert Inferno!

CHAPTER I

Luke Has Suspicions

"STAN," Luke Shotwell said, "I ain't aimin' to be a dispenser of gloom, but I've shore got a powerful hunch that this here trip to Caligon is goin' to prove tumultuous."

Stanley Powell, citizen of Oregon and all frontier points to the south and east, let his gaze range along the serpentine trail before he replied.

Mixing a small trail herd of cattle

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

in with a pack-train was not the best way to travel. In fact, it was one of the worst. The steers kicked the fine earth of the old La Framboise fur trail into a fine powder that drifted back in a smothering cloud over the backs of the pack-horses. It brought choked curses from the packers and slowed their progress to a creep that chafed the spirit.

The ammonia-laden reek from the sweating animals was with them always.

So, too, was the bawling of cattle, the cracks of whips and the jangling of horse bells. But men in mining camps must eat and beef was an essential article of diet which they demanded.

There was also another cloud over the lives of men in this fall of 1860. It was the shadow cast by the threat of impending civil war.

STAN POWELL'S glance came back to rest on paunchy, bandy-legged Luke Shotwell affectionately. Since Powell had first gone into the business of handling pack trains and beef on the hoof, Shotwell had been friend and trusted employee.

Spanish style boots, trimmed with beads, adorned Shotwell's feet. A flat-crowned hat, so broad that its brim sagged from sheer weight, shadowed the blocky, saddle-hued features. Belled spurs jingled on his heels. At his waist a huge disk of hand-beaten silver, embellished by a long-horned Spanish steer, added a final touch of frontier splendor. But with all the garishness of his attire, Luke Shotwell was solid and dependable.

"WHAT makes you think the going will be rough, Luke?" young Powell asked.

Shotwell snorted. "Ain't the signs been pointin' that way? Ever since we left the Willamette Valley we been havin' bad luck. What about one packer bein' tomahawked in ambush? How about the way this here mongrel outfit's been watched every step of the way?"

"I wish I knew," said Powell.

"And when we get to Caligon," Shotwell went on, "an upstandin', straight-speakin' Union man like yoreself don't fit in a-tall. Caligon's teamin' with riffraff that wants to overthrow the Gov'ment just for a chance to line their own pockets. They ain't neither good Southerners nor good Northerners. Just human bats that decent folks can't stomach."

"That still doesn't explain why I shouldn't go there again," remarked Powell.

"Nope. But yuh shouldn't—not when I can go. Yuh hadn't ought to see that pretty Southern gal no more. Yuh're clingin' to a forlorn hope, as the feller says. I ain't even hintin' she ain't mighty nice and fine, and I ain't disputin' her eye-fillin' qualities, neither. But she's got admirers among them plotters down there. And, if you keep on shinin' up to her, somebody's goin' to use yore back for a knife scabbard."

"Trouble with you, Luke," remarked Powell, "is that you need some new store teeth. Indigestion's soured your thinking. Especially when it comes to Annis Garner. It's natural for her to favor the South. Her people once owned a big plantation in Virginia."

"Shure. And that's jest the reason yuh never can pull double. Yuh're both stiff-necked and on opposite sides of a blamed serious question. . . Say,

what in tarnation's come over that renegade, Cushman? Look at the ugly devil!"

A pack-horse had slipped on a loose boulder and was sliding from the dugway, banging its pack against tree trunks and rocks. A second packer had hurried to help Cushman, the packer who was handling the horse. Instead of accepting the proffered assistance, Cushman shouted for him to stay away. When the packer ignored the order, Cushman broke into a bellowed profanity and swung a balled fist at the man's jaw, knocking him cold.

Disgusted, Stan Powell spurred his bay forward.

"What's the big idea, Cushman?" he demanded. "Can't a man even try to act white without your going berserk?"

"No snoopin' fool's goin' to tell me how to do my work!" growled Cushman. "The agreement in Portland was that I was to have charge of Burr's goods, and the horses that carried 'em."

"Right," said Stan Powell. "But the horses are mine, and I have a say in the way they're handled."

"I'm takin' good care of 'em. Haven't seen any sore backs or lame ones in my bunch, have yuh? All right, then. Quit yore belly-achin' and—"

"That's all the slack I'm taking from you, Cushman!" Powell cut in angrily. "This is the third man you've knocked out without provocation on this trip. One more mistake of the same kind and I'll mess your face up so the yellow-jackets will follow you. Savvy?"

"I savvy plenty," muttered the packer. "Yore bein' boss gives yuh the final say, right or wrong. But just keep them other hombres away from me and there'll be no trouble. I'm peaceable till some blasted abolitionist starts shovin' his nose into my business." He raised his voice to the pack-animals. "Come on, yuh club-footed jackass. Get back on the trail!"

STAN POWELL

Powell watched the rebellious packer put the mare back in line. He was not satisfied with his own handling of the case. He should either have kept his mouth shut entirely, or he should have taken more decided action. Anyhow this fellow Cushman needed watching. At times he acted like a fool; but there were other times when he showed signs of being the smartest as well as the most dangerous man in the train.

THE whole deal, which involved Burr, the Portland shipper, who was Cushman's employer needed investigation — not Cushman alone. There was something peculiar about a shipper's demanding that one particular man have complete charge of his goods while it was in transit, even though he paid enough extra to cover the eccentricity—half again what most merchants offered. But Stan Powell had not argued. He needed money too badly to refuse such an amount.

Luke Shotwell rode up, extending a palm holding a number of black

grains in its hollow.

"Stan," he said soberly, "I hate to bust in on yore meditations, but I garnered these kernels of destruction back where that pack-horse stumbled. Kinda unsettlin' to find that busted flour sacks run gunpowder, ain't it?"

"Gunpowder!" exclaimed Powell.

"And that ain't all," said Shotwell. "Last night when Cushman wasn't watchin', I hefted one of them boxes that's supposed to have molasses cans packed inside 'em. Sirup's hefty, but it don't weight that much. I'm bettin' three to one there's guns to go with the powder inside them crates."

"You could be mistaken, Luke," Powell said gravely.

"But I ain't. Not this time. That durned cuss Cushman does too many queer things, anyhow. Remember him turnin' off the trail to talk with somebody yesterday?"

"Yes. But it could have been one of the packers. You said you didn't see them."

"But I got ears. There ain't no two men in the outfit that would or could talk peaceable with the durned skunk and, unless this Cushman was carryin' on a three-way conversation with hisself, he swapped speech with at least a pair o' strangers. I'm not going to be a bit surprised if I find he belongs to a bunch of desperadoes that's been raidin' the gold mines an' pack-trains. He don't have it in his plans that us or the guns will ever reach Caligon, either."

"I'll look through the shipment tonight," said Powell.

Shotwell's words made him think of several ugly possibilities. This might be the reason for Burr's insistence that Cushman look after his shipment. Burr was from Virginia. He was an agreeable, cultured man of the sort who might easily foresee the coming rift between the North and the South. Could it be possible that already he and other Southern sympathizers in Oregon were planning to make armed trouble?

Powell broke off his thinking as he saw young Don Parker, one of his employes, riding toward him. Parker was a reckless youngster of eighteen, who would rather do anything than the routine work of clearing trail or tending horses. Powell smiled, wondering what was in the youth's mind now.

"Say, Boss," Parker let him know quickly, "how about my leavin' the train for a spell to knock us over some venison?"

"We don't need meat, Don," said Powell, "but I've got another little job you might like as well. How would you like to keep your eye on Cushman for the rest of the day? Could you do it without his knowing you were watching him?"

"You bet I can!"

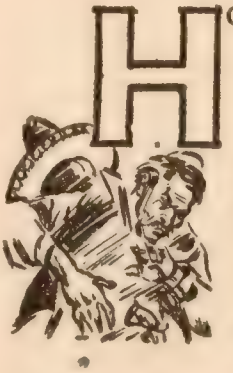
"Fine. If he leaves the train and strikes off into the woods, follow him and watch everything he does. If he meets anyone, try to overhear what's said."

Parker nodded.

"I'll stick to him like honey to hair," he promised, "and he won't know nothin' about it, neither."

CHAPTER II

Forced Confession



HOURS passed until long blue shadows pointed eastward from peak and pine. Stan Powell had seen nothing of young Don Parker since their conversation early in the day. Parker had vanished into the forest swells with the completeness of a salmon into the sea. Cushman still rode alone, his black eyes glinting belligerently beneath scowling brows.

Horse bells tinkled lazily through the haze of dust above the trail. The higher summits of the Siskiyous were pinked with dying light. Lower down the forest-fired maples were yellow tapers along dark avenues of pines.

From his pocket Powell pulled a small plush-covered case. When the hinged lid snapped open a vibrant face smiled from the tinted daguerreotype. Even the demure styles of the day could not hide the strength and vivacity of Annis Garner's face. He made himself believe that Annis was smiling at him, and for the moment this

LUKE SHOTWELL

made him forget Burr, gunpowder, desperadoes and secessionists. Gently he touched the picture to his lips.

He was returning the case to his pocket when a single rifle shot, followed by a gurgling cry, impinged upon his ear-drums. Twigs whipped his face as he rode toward the sound, which came out of a small, marshy clearing with a pond at its center.

At the edge of this clearing was Don Parker's horse, its reins tangled in a choke-cherry bush. Parker lay in the ooze at the margin of the pond, an arrow sticking from his breast. One look showed that he was dead.

Close to him was his gun, its barrel resting on a hummock of grass. Powell lifted the weapon and sniffed at the muzzle. His nostrils recognized the stinging pungency of freshly exploded powder. In the firing chamber was an empty shell.

Almost instantly Powell was joined by Shotwell. Other packers, including Cushman, were only a minute behind. The men fanned out across the canyon, but found no traces of the attacker.

"Derned funny," Shotwell breathed in Powell's ear. "Everything about this here trip is more than somewhat peculiar. This looks to anybody at first glance, like the work of one single Indian, but lone Reds don't monkey round big pack-trains."

Powell was thinking back, trying to reconstruct the scene as it had been when the shot had been fired. He remembered that the train had been stopped while two of the packers were chopping through a windfall and clearing the trail. The path at this point had been particularly tortuous, with many hairpin curves as it skirted between spongy bottom land and precipitous ridges.

While the others were wrapping Parker's remains in the canvas Stan Powell climbed back to the trail. With a start he realized that Cushman's horses had been nearest to the scene of the murder. More significant yet, only a hundred feet or so of the trail was visible in either direction from this point. Was it possible . . . But, no. An arrow had killed Don Parker.

The men scrabbled up the slope with a tarpaulin-draped form.

"Here, Cushman," panted Shotwell, "you ain't done nothin' but try to look remorseful. Grab hold of that pinto hoss while we lash this body to its back."

The horse, frightened by the smell of human blood, jumped, swinging its head violently. It struck Cushman's

left hand and the man winced as in pain. Powell wondered why a blow from a horse's nose should cause such suffering.

THEY camped shortly afterward in a grove of fir, close under the mountain, where hills and trees made almost a natural corral. One was easily completed by adding a few poles and stringing some hundred feet of heavy rope in the basin.

The packers worked quietly but their faces were filled with apprehension. Stan Powell continued to watch Cushman. There was something peculiar about the man's appearance. And he wore gloves. Cushman had never worn gloves before, and there must be a reason for doing it now.

Stan sauntered closer. Cushman was not using his left hand and the glove that covered it was dark and discolored. When the cook called the men to supper, instead of joining the others about the fire, he sat moodily apart.

"Aren't you eating, Cushman?" asked Stan.

"I ain't hungry."

"Hands cold?"

"What the devil d'yuh mean?"

"Pretty warm weather for wearing leather gloves, isn't it?" pursued Powell. "Sure, the reason you're not eating is because you don't want to take them off?"

Cushman rose from his box, a huge, ominous bulk, bristling with antagonism.

"I don't like what yuh're sayin'," he growled.

"And I don't like the way you're actin'," Stan Powell said flatly. "Take off those gloves. I want to look at your hands."

Cushman made a move as though about to comply. Instead, he shot his uninjured hand inside his jacket and jerked it back out, gripping a bowie. Hurling the knife, he followed it in a tremendous leap.

The blade hissed past Powell's neck, and stuck, vibrating, in a tree. Stan Powell met the charge with a hard punch to the jaw that staggered Cushman. Before he could recover, Powell crashed a clubbed revolver down upon his skull. His fur cap and matted hair absorbed part of the blow but it still brought the packer to his knees.

While he was still dazed, Powell tore the glove from his fingers. Blood dripped from the hand, yet at first Stan could see no injury. Then he found a slash through the web of skin and muscle between the thumb and forefinger. A bullet had made the gash, and instantly Powell knew that the slug had come from Parker's weapon which had been fired a moment before he was murdered.

"Bring a rope, Luke!" Powell called sternly.

Shotwell's compliance was almost instantaneous. As a noose settled around Cushman's neck a wild fear blazed in his eyes.

"What yuh fellers aimin' to do?" he howled.

"Hang you unless you come clean and confess," Powell said coldly.

"But I ain't got nothin' to confess. I—"

"String him up, boys."

"Wait, fellers! Don't do that! I'll talk! Shure, I killed Don Parker! He follered me. I crept up and jumped on him. He fired once and nicked me. Before he could shoot again, I knocked the gun from his hands."

"Then you shot him with an arrow?" asked Powell.

"Nope. I couldn't handle the bow after he'd wounded me, so I jest drove the arrer into his throat by hand."

"What about the ammunition and guns in those cases marked flour and molasses?"

"Burr wanted 'em fixed that way," Cushman said sullenly.

"Who were they for?"

"I don't—"

"Stretch him up, boys."

"Wait, wait! I'll tell. They're for the Indians. Burr wants to start the tribes on the war-path. War's comin'. See? It'll help the South. Burr's been sendin' more stuff down by other trains."

STAN POWELL'S thoughts raced as he listened. There had been a number of murders on the remote trails and in isolated camps. Gold had been stolen in quantities. Burr must have had a hand in that. The fellow was using the growing tension between Southern sympathizers and Northern supporters to enable him to pick out dupes, by use of whom he could spread terror through the back country and feather his own nest at the same time.

Some of the men who worked with Burr were doubtless renegades, without loyalties of any kind. Cushman was one of these—a man ready to cut the throat of anyone, if it could be done for profit.

Burr, if Powell remembered correctly, had come North under some sort of cloud. The man was not in good repute in the South. Likely this was his way of trying to reestablish himself and, at the stme time, acquire wealth. Powell doubted if this would work. Southerners he had known were proud and hot-headed, but brave, and certainly not given to treachery.

"Do we finish stretchin' his neck now?" asked Shotwell when Powell did not speak.

"No. We'll hold him. If this Burr is to be exposed, we've got to have evidence. That's where Cushman'll come in. . . ."

Bits of cloud, red as balls of blood-soaked cotton, drifted overhead. In the thickets the shades of night still clung. Cold, flowing down from the snowy peaks made Stan Powell shiver. His limbs felt stiff and numb. As he worked to limber them, he stared into the shifting murk with smarting eyes. He was uneasy.

Every precaution had been taken to make the camp safe against any possible surprise, yet Powell's worry persisted. He was certain that Cushman was still holding back part of the truth, and determined that when morning came he would wring more of the ugly facts from the man. In the morning—

A war-whoop sawed across Powell's frayed nerves with screaming wildness. Hard on the howling came the crash of many guns. Cattle, sleeping but a moment earlier, were now on their feet. Bovine rumblings ran across the meadow like the mutterings of an earthquake.

Jerking his revolver from its holster, Stan Powell triggered lead at a brush-blurred rider. His men were rolling from their blankets, their mouths full of blasphemy, their guns blazing.

All sounds ran together in an inseparable roar. Rifle fire, popping picket ropes and stamping hoofs. Horses, cattle and men were all caught in a maelstrom of blazing action that scattered them across the flats like debris from a twister.

Powell located three of his men by muzzle blooms. Shotwell was one. He was swearing rapidly, but without repetition, as he directed his companions in a tree to tree retreat. Powell joined them and the three fought their way half up the mountain before they finally dropped their pursuers.

It was afternoon before they dared return to the gutted camp. Here they found further confirmation of what had been apparent during the fighting. Whites as well as Indians had participated in the raid. No bunch of braves would have robbed so systematically. Food, clothing, and trading goods had all been taken. So, too, had the livestock. Pack-horses, saddle animals and steers except for a

Over a tossing man Powell saw the fierce face of the ex-sheriff of Caligon swipping up an army pistol (Chapter XII)

few head that had been killed during the attack were all gone.

AFTER some time they found the bodies of their comrades and buried them. When this was done, Shotwell said soberly:

"I reckon now that we've got this done, yuh'll be hittin' back fer Portland, huh, Stan? Me, I crave to fix this Burr hombre the way the Indians fixed our pardners."

Powell shook his head. "Not yet, Luke. We let Cushman get away. We've got to find him again. Burr has friends and influence in Portland. We must have proof against him before we make an accusation. I'm going on to Caligon."

Shotwell stared. "Yuh mean yuh're fool enough to go on down there, plumb busted—without a nickel in yore pants? Huh! That ain't courage., It's love. That Garner gal down there is upsettin' yore reason."

"You going with me, or back with the other two packers?" Powell demanded.

Shotwell spat disgustedly at a lizard. "Reckon I'll be loco, too, and trail along. There's one or two things I'm curious about my own self. One's the kind of Injuns in on this killin'. Unless I'm crazy, there was several Apaches in that bunch. I heard 'em yell, an' I seen a couple of 'em. But what would Apaches be doin' this far north?"

Shotwell fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a small, plush-covered case and handed it to Stan.

"Reckon yuh musta lost this durin' the fracas," he said. "I picked it up over yonder."

Powell stared at it in amazement. The case was exactly like one that still reposed in his pocket. He snapped open the lid and stiffened. The picture inside was the same! Annis Garner's features smiled at him. And as he closed the case Stan Powell knew that he could have no peace now until he heard some explanation from her lips. Surely she could not have given her likeness to any of the cutthroats who had been in the raiding party.

That was impossible!

He was called back to the present by Shotwell's mutterings.

"Goin' to be a tarnation long walk to Caligon. But mebbe we can catch ourselves some ponies."

CHAPTER III

Campaign in Caligon

CALIGON at last! Beyond the cedar-studded graveyard Stan could see the bawdy frontier town, sprawled at the foot of a mountain.

Here was the West at its wildest—a meeting place of cattlemen and miners. Loaded ore wagons were creeping down the steep dugways from the workings. In the stockyards at the city's edge milled hundreds of steers.

Caligon was a distribution point for a score of smaller camps. Beef, bacon and bullets all poured out of Caligon. Stan Powell felt the loss of his trail herd keenly as he thought of the high prices usually paid in the moneyed little city.

As they passed the cemetery Shotwell jerked a thumb toward the gravestones.

"Let's rest these scrubs we're forkin' for a minute and cast our eyes over the epistles engraved on them rocks," he suggested.

"You always want to stop at cemeteries," Powell protested.

"Yep. 'Tain't surprisin'. I learned my letters offa tombstones and my love for poetry by the same solemn method. Gravestones is where I got my schoolin'! However this here pertickler plantin' ground don't stir my better nature none whatever. If the Lawd seen fit to cull over the whole sleepin' bunch, he couldn't get enough good 'pints in the consarned lot to fit one soul for everlastin' bliss."

As he spoke, a freak wind, carrying the manure-laden dust of the stockyards, roared up from the valley, enveloping the cemetery in a choking fog. With it came a sheet of paper that struck the horn of Powell's saddle. Seizing it, he stared at it, seeing that a list of names covered it.

Then a tall man stepped from behind a cedar and strode toward him.

"Suh," the tall man announced peremptorily, "I'll thank yuh foh that papah."

There were well trimmed sideburns on the man's long, flat cheeks. His boots were high and polished, his cravat and flowered waistcoat were sartorially correct. The long-tailed black coat fitted him as a glove, except for a bulge on either hip that could easily have been raised by pistol butts.

At first the man was curtly remote, but soon interest flickered in his face. With easy grace he extended his hand for the paper that Stan held out to him and bowed as he received it.

"Accept my thanks, suh. Douglas R. Buckneh is my name. Perhaps some time soon I may be able to do something foh yuh, suh. The citizens of Caligon asked me to address them at a meeting at the opera house tonight. I came out heah with my notes to enjoy a little solitude while preparing my address."

"What is this special occasion in Caligon?" Powell asked.

Buckner's eyebrows jerked incredulously.

"Suh, yuh must have been in the howling wilderness a right smart spell, not to know. Tomorrow the great State of California goes to the poles to elect statesmen to see it through the turbulent times ahead."

Stan Powell wondered how, even through the toil and desperation of his trip he could have lost track of so

important an event. Then Douglas Buckner was speaking again.

"Suh, I presume yuh are stoppin' in town?"

"That is our present intention."

"Perhaps then I shall have the pleasure of meeting yo'-all again. Good day, suh."

AS SOON as he reached town, Powell went at once to the Wells-Fargo office. He had done business there, off and on, for years, and knew the manager. It was easy enough to borrow the money he needed, making arrangements to pay whenever it was convenient. A good name was worth something.

With cash to spend he and Luke Shotwell put up their horses and started looking for lodgings. The town was bright with campaign bunting. Banners urged people to vote for four different candidates for President—Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, John Bell and John Breckenridge.

In front of saloons and gambling halls groups of stockmen and miners argued the local issues. What they wanted were better markets, better roads, better prices. Mixed with this was concern over the national problems. Slavery, States' Rights, and the possibility of Secession concerned them, yet seemed far away.

Close at hand were the matters of recent stage robberies and Indian depredations. Whiskey flowed freely and fights were frequent. Caligon was electric with an ever-growing tension.

Shotwell kept glancing about uneasily, until Powell was moved to ask the reason.

"Nothin' special," the older man told him. "Except that I expect Cushman to club me over the head or pull a bead on me any minute."

"What makes you think he's here?"

"I don't think. I know. Whilst yuh was oratin' to that dressed-up gent at the graveyard, my eye lit on a spread-out footprint in the mud close by. There ain't another such broad foot this side of perdition, and a yeller-jacket was still a kickin' in the mud, tellin' me that the print had been made more or less recent. And havin' Cushman loose and watchin' for me, when I'd so much rather be in ambush watchin' for him, don't add to my pleasure one whit."

"We'll keep our eyes peeled," consoled Powell. "Maybe we'll see him first."

In front of a hostelry called the Magnolia House, a florid gentleman in a beaver hat and broadcloth suit was haranguing a crowd of radicals surrounding the box on which he stood.

"Gentlemen," he was saying, "if that Abolitionist Abraham Lincoln, becomes President of the United States, my loyalty is gone. Then, my friends, it will be time to draw away from the corrupt Union and establish an independent empire here on the Pacific slope."

The rabble about the speaker cheered. Encouraged, he continued:

"And I dare anyone to challenge my statements."

Stan Powell started toward the box, but a raw-boned man in blue uniform was ahead of him. He wore a corporal's chevrons and grim determination bracketed his wide mouth.

"Well, Corporal?" blared the speaker. "What is it you wish to say?"

Not a word came from the man in uniform, but his powerful shoulders hunched. He drew back an arm that bulged with muscle, then lashed it out, his balled fist catching the orator on the chin, with a smack that carried for twenty feet. The speaker was lifted from his pedestal by the impact and knocked senseless into the crowd.

Angry shouts of "Lynch him! Lynch him!" arose, and a dozen pairs of hands reached out toward the soldier.

STAN POWELL'S pistol was drawn before he was aware of it himself.

"Touch that uniform and I'll shoot!" he shouted. "The man was acting as any loyal American should!"

"My sentiments exactly," agreed Shotwell. "The mouthy traitors."

"Back up against the hotel," Powell directed Shotwell and the corporal. "If we've got to fight, let's have them come from the front only!"

Three bleak-faced men, backs to the wall, faced the oncoming crowd.

The corporal spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"Thanks, pards, for sittin' in on the game. But yuh shore put yoreselves in a hole. Them yeller-bellied coyotes mean to climb us."

Stan Powell nodded. "But it's going to take them a little while to work up courage. Are you the only soldier in town?"

"Nope. Sergeant Donnell and seven other men from my company are up at Calfornia Joe's playing faro. Wish they was here."

"Maybe they will be," said Stan.

Glancing around, he saw a shock-headed boy of thirteen or fourteen. He held up the gold piece that the hotel clerk had refused.

"Here kid!" he called. "See this?"

The youngster's eyes popped and he squirmed forward.

"Watcha want, Mister?"

Stan slipped the coin into the boy's hand.

"Run up to California Joe's and tell the sergeant there that his corporal's in a tough spot. Get him and his men down here pronto, and you earn another ten."

"You bet!"

Someone shouted as the boy darted away, but the lad turned down a narrow alley and made his escape. The crowd moved closer. Stan drove them back with his swinging gun barrel.

"Just remember," he warned, "push us too hard and the ones in front get shot. If you have any complaints against us, get your law officers and go at it legally."

Rather than risk fire from the three revolvers, the crowd paused to argue the matter. That was what Powell wanted. Seconds were precious.

Someone went for the sheriff. Powell took his first deep breath since the fracas had started.

If the kid would only find the sergeant! Horses' hoofs beat a tattoo on the hard-packed street. The corporal nudged Powell.

"Hombre, if that's the sheriff, we'd better fight. All he'll do is turn us over to a bunch of stranglers. It's . . . Hooray! Donnell! Hi, Sarg! Over here!"

The crowd stepped back to avoid the horses. The sergeant rode the lead horse. Jet eyes twinkled from his brick-red features.

"Hello, Drung!" he greeted. "Been huntin' more trouble, I see."

"Listen, Sarg," declared Corporal Drung. "All I done was take a sock at a traitor. But if these two fellers hadn't come along, the scoundrels woulda pulled mé limb from limb. What's yore names, boys? Want yuh to meet the sergeant."

The non-com's nod was short, but friendly.

"I'd certainly like to teach this riff-raff some respect for the flag," he remarked apologetically. "But the lieut said one more scrap and our leaves would all be stopped . . . Come on, boys, let's get over into the other end of town where we can liquor up without smellin' this Magnolia House. Lord, I'd like to get outa the army and back to punchin' cows agin!"

"How come you went into the Army when you feel that way?" Stan Powell asked, and the sergeant laughed shortly.

"Needed money and a job," he said. "Cowpunchin' was sorta lonely and I thought I'd like a change. But fight-

in' Indians ain't plumb healthly, either, even if yuh don't have a chance to get lonesome."

CHAPTER IV

A Rival

IT WAS twilight when Stan Powell entered the Bedrock Hotel where Annis Garner always stayed. After ascertaining at the desk that she was there, he took the stairs three steps at a time. He always felt this impatient eagerness to see her.

He hurried down the upper hall, then stopped abruptly. Annis's door was closed, but through the transom he could hear a man speaking, his voice tender.

"But, Hon, I told you I lost it," he was saying.

"How did you lose it?" Suspicion and displeasure were in Annis's well-modulated tones. "How, Stuart? I do not care to have my likeness become public property."

The voices dropped and, for a time, Powell could not hear what was said. Then he heard a man saying:

"I don't like these adventurers and renegades who pretend to be sympathizing with the South. If war breaks out, they'll do more harm than good. Burr, Buckner and Cushman are that type. Buckner's back in Caligon, isn't he?"

"Yes. Both he and Mr. Cushman reached town last night. But surely there can be no connection between them. A gentleman like Mr. Buckner would not have anything to do with such a man as Mr. Cushman."

"I'm not so sure," her companion answered thoughtfully. Then he laughed. "But there's no use for you to worry your pretty head about it. Come on, Hon. Let's kiss and make up."

Jealousy surged through Stan Powell. His fingers closed about the knob of the locked door and shook it violently.

"Let me in!" he called. "At once!"

A muffled gasp seeped through the door. Annis repeated his name in a frightened undertone.

"Good Lord!" said the man inside, under his breath.

Furiously Powell shook the knob.

"Will you open this door?" he demanded angrily.

There was no answer. But he could hear stealthy, hurried movements. Forgetting courtesy, Stan Powell gave the doorknob a violent turn and shoved at the door. But it held.

Breaking in would probably mean the end of everything between him

[*Turn page*]

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and Annis yet, if she was in love with one of the men who had ruined him, that was finished anyhow.

Abruptly he drew back and drove his shoulder against the door. The panels buckled and splintered. Inside, Annis gave a low exclamation of fright as the door gave way, catapulting him into the room.

He was just in time to see a man's head vanish through the window. A sheet, tied to the bedstead in the adjoining room, and dropped out the window, was explanatory.

Annis tried to block Stan Powell's way, but he swept her aside and rushed to the window. On the ground below he saw a man sprinting up the alley between the hotel and the nearest building.

"Halt!" Powell shouted, but the man paid no attention.

POWELL reached for his gun. It was gone! He whirled and saw that Annis had purloined his weapon from his holster and was backing away from him with the barrel leveled.

"Stanley Powell," she breathed, "are you mad?"

"I have every right to be!" he blazed. "I come back here to see you and find you with one of the men who destroyed my pack-train and murdered six of my packers!"

"That is not true, Stanley Powell, and you know it! Stuart would not commit such a crime under any circumstances!"

"He wouldn't eh? Whoever he is! How come, then, that I picked up the picture of you that he lost just where he had had a fight with one of my men?"

"W-h-a-t?"

Powell held out the picture.

Annis took it hesitatingly. But the defiance in her manner was definite.

"I want to know who he is!" Powell demanded.

"Moreover, I want to know his full name," Stan continued. "If you think this matter is not going to be investigated, you are mistaken."

"You'll not find out anything from me, Stanley!" Annis defied. "Not in your present mood! You have never acted like this before. I can't imagine—"

"Neither have you ever acted like this!" he interrupted.

He could not help but note that even in angry excitement, she was beautiful. He liked vivacious, intelligent, strong-willed women. Annis had all these characteristics. But at the moment all he could think about was that she was shielding his enemy who had brought him such bitter disappointment.

"You can't force me to give you any information, Stanley!" Annis declared.

"I'm not so sure of that. Anyhow, you should be glad to tell me what I ask, if you think of me as you have said you do."

"There certainly has been no tenderness in the way you asked these favors!" she came back at him. "Perhaps, when you make a different approach, you may have a different answer. No real gentleman—"

"It isn't customary foh Yankees to be gentlemen, Miss Gahneh," said a suave voice behind Powell. "Youah only way to avoid such insults is to refuse to talk with them."

Annis looked as surprised as Powell at the interruption. Both whirled to face Douglas Buckner, who had stepped inside the door and was tapping on the floor with his gold-headed cane. For a moment Annis's indignation was vented upon him.

"I do not seen to remember hearing you knock, or telling you to come in, either!" she retorted.

"A thousand pahdons, ma'am," Buckner said elaborately. "But I could not make you heah, and the

time approaches foh youah appearance at the Opera House. May I beg you to get youhself ready, while I put this intehlopeh in his place. Suh, theah is the doah'!"

As Mr. Buckner reached beneath the tails of his coat, Stan Powell spanned the room in one long stride and struck him in the face with his palm, knocking the revolver from his half-raised hand. Blood was gushing from the exquisite gentleman's nostrils as he backed against the wall.

"Suh," he panted, "I shall demand to face yuh with dueling pistols. Only blood can satisfy this insult."

Stan laughed angrily. "Demand and be hanged. Every honest Union man has more important work to do than fighting duels with traitorous Secessionists. Here, Annis. I'll trade you Buckner's pistol for my own."

SHE handed him his weapon, and he gave her the one he had taken from Buckner. He wondered if she would ever speak to him again. It seemed improbable. His world was turning topsyturvy along with the Nation.

For a moment he felt penitent, had an impulse to ask her forgiveness. But Buckner's presence made that impossible. Besides, he was the one who had suffered.

He whirled on his heel and left the room. As he clumped toward the stairs he could hear Buckner declaring in thick tones that he would shoot him on sight. Perhaps he would. Some of these fire-eating Southerners were pistol experts. At the moment Stan Powell cared little if he were killed.

He was in the same frame of mind as he stalked down the street and, for want of something better to do, wandered into California Joe's saloon and gaming emporium. Carelessly he sauntered over to a faro table where play was running high.

"Hey, Mister," an eager voice said at his elbow, "I got somethin' mighty important to tell yuh."

Stan turned from watching the play to find the red-headed boy, who had taken his message that morning, tugging at his sleeve.

"What is it, Kid?" he asked.

"Come outside," the boy urged. "I don't want 'em to hear us talkin'."

"Mind if I trail along?" queried Luke Shotwell, who had come up to stand beside Powell. "When momentous facts are bein' spilled, I'm plumb thirsty to absorb 'em."

"Sure," said Stan. "Come on."

Outside in the darkness he laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What's your name, Kid?" he asked.

"Bert Davis. An' I'm a cowman, same as yuh are. My dad was shot by Sheriff Rolfe because he wouldn't pay Rolfe for bein' allowed to drive stock into Caligon. Some day I'll get him, too. Just wait an' see!"

"Better not think about revenge," advised Stan Powell. "It makes life too bitter . . . What was it you wanted to tell us?"

"Just a little while back," the boy said earnestly, "when the rally at the Opera House was breakin' up, I heard Buckner whisperin' to that feller the corporal slugged. I crept close and heard there's goin' to be a secret meetin' right away in the upstairs of the Magnolia House. It's to plan how to win the election tomorrow. Yore name was mentioned, too. Buckner said they'd figger a way to get rid of yuh. Sheriff Rolfe's goin' to be at the meetin', so it's bound to be crooked."

Stan whistled softly. "Can we get to listen in on it in any way?" he asked.

"Shore. From the attic. We can crawl through the window in the gable by gettin' onto the roof of the Nugget Mercantile. All we got to do is slip a plank across. And I know where one is."

"Bert, don't you realize this is a mighty dangerous thing you're suggesting?" Powell asked soberly.

"I've done a lot of dangerous things, and I ain't scared," the boy declared bravely. "Come on! We gotta fog."

"All right," Stan Powell gave in. "Luke, I'll go with Bert while you hunt up the sergeant. Ask him to send a messenger to Fort Sierra tonight. If more troops don't come to police the town, there'll be killings before the election is over!"

CHAPTER V

Dangerous Eavesdropping

THE ceiling joists creaked through the attic's stuffy darkness. Cobwebs brushed Stan Powell's face. Whenever his foot touched a loose board the accumulated dust of years sprayed into his nostrils. A murmur of men's voices from below sounded like the droning of hived bees.

Bert touched Powell's arm.

"Gotta be mighty careful from here on," he whispered. "There ain't nothin' but laths and plaster and the ceilin' joists. A feller's leg would go right through if he made a misstep."

Powell started to light a match, then thought better of it. There were holes in the walls of the attic. People on the street might possibly catch the shine of a match. It was better to feel each inch of the way than to take that risk.

The rectangle of pale starlight, marking the loft door, was becoming dangerously far off. Once trapped in such a place, there could be only the faintest chance of escape.

Then the hum of conversation was directly under him. Suddenly the buzzing ceased, and Buckner's voice came distinctly to his ears.

"Gentlemen, tomorrow Abraham Lincoln is going to be elected President of the United States. When that happens, War and Secession become inevitable. Whetheh the commonwealths of the Pacific Slope join with the South, or set up an independent republic is foh the time being, irrelevant.

"The impo'tant thing at present is that we keep control of Caligon, even if we can't elect Breckenridge. If the Republicans win we'll be driven out and lose the chance of ouah lives to make a fortune. Mark my word, gentlemen, gold from these Western mining towns may well turn the tide of battle in favoh of the South.

"Already theah are Southerners in this part of the country trying to figure means of securing gold, once the conflict starts. Ouah organization is firmly rooted heah. We have a lot of gold dust foh which we need a buyeh. The South, when wah starts, will be in no position to ask how we got what we have to offeh them."

"Have they found that any of us have been in any way connected with the robberies?" asked another voice.

"Not yet, but there's a man in town that we must dispose of or they will learn about it," said Buckner. "His name's Powell. Burr, ouah agent at Portland, told Cushman to warn us against him. We planned to kill him on the trail down, but he got away. Powell smells a rat and he's got to be disposed of at once."

"You gents don't need to fret about that," rumbled another voice. "I'll see he's slapped in the face with a spade before tomorrow night."

"That's Sheriff Rolfe," whispered Bert.

"What's more," went on the sheriff's barking voice, "we'll scare the Republicans away from the votin' place. We'll have plenty of armed men patrollin' the town and they'll use their guns if they need to. All

that you boys got to do is to back up our plays. But we've got to do it in such a way that the legality of the vote won't be challenged."

Powell was so interested that he had forgotten the danger of being discovered. Then he heard Bert's frightened whisper;

"Mister, the door's shut! We're trapped!"

"Buck up, Kid," Powell whispered back. "The wind may have closed it."

"There ain't no wind. Anyhow, the door opens in. Hear that?"

THROUGH the inky darkness ran queer cracklings and creaks. Moving weight was being applied to boards and ceiling joists. But where? The sounds seemed to come first in one direction, then another. Bert was shivering.

"They'll kill us if they—"

Powell laid a hand across the boy's lips. Whoever was approaching in the darkness was undoubtedly alone. If the Breckenridge men knew that their meeting was being overheard they would not make such speeches.

For a moment Powell thought it might be Shotwell, but there had not been time for Shotwell to find the sergeant and return so quickly. Powell touched his revolver reassuringly. Yet he knew that if he used it the entire Magnolia House would be thrown into an uproar. Challenging the stranger was impracticable for the same reason. He must wait.

"Bert, worm your way back to that door," he breathed into the boy's ear. "If no one is guarding it, get out and run for all you're worth!"

When the pressure of the boy's body against his was gone, he strained still harder to locate his adversary, who had ceased moving, and apparently was trying to classify the sounds caused by Bert's departure. But soon he resumed his advance toward where Stan Powell crouched.

But from what direction? The entire attic seemed full of tenuous vibrations. The stirred-up dust was heavy and, mixed with it, was the rancid smell of a sweaty, unwashed human. Where had he caught this same offensive smell before? Cushman, of course! It was Cushman who was stalking him!

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Powell glanced toward the door. It was open again, which meant that Bert had a chance to escape. And the odor from the approaching man now told Powell from what direction he could expect the assault. Though he could see nothing, some instinct of self-preservation warned him that Cushman was almost within striking distance.

Acting on a sudden hunch he whipped off his coat and, balling it up, thrust it out ahead of him. Instantly it was jerked out of his hand by the impact of a striking knife. The force behind the blow threw the knife wielder off balance. He pitched forward across the joists, one knee crashing through the lath and plaster. Through the opening came light enough for the two men in the attic to see each other, and it was Cushman's evil face that Stan Powell saw.

Cushman's pistol must have been cocked, for the weapon roared as the man fell. Powell stepped back from the deadly thread of light, missing the bullet by little more than a hair's breadth. Before Cushman could shoot again, Powell kicked the weapon from his hand, and grasping the kicking man by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his trousers, rammed him through the lath and plaster.

The startled plotters below craned curious necks—and received a baptism of plaster as Cushman crushed into their midst. Powell could pick out the joists now and moving with the speed of a cat, he made for the attic door.

The plank was still in place. When he crossed it, Bert was waiting on the roof of the Nugget Mercantile.

"Hurry, Mister!" the boy said breathlessly. "I'll show yuh how to get down quick!"

WHEN they reached the ground in a shadowed alley, the Magnolia House was beginning to disgorge infuriated Democrats. Powell shoved another coin into Bert's hand.

"Get out of here as fast as you can," he said. "And don't tell anyone where you've been or that you've had anything to do with me. Understand?"

The boy nodded, but put the coin back in Stan's hand.

"I ain't goin' to take no more money for servin' my country," he stated loftily. "I wouldn't have took the other but Ma was outa groceries. If any time I can help again—"

"Same here," said Stan. "Now you clear out. And remember—when there are Breckenridge men about, you never heard of me!"

He flattened himself against a brick wall. He could hear Bert's receding footsteps. If the boy could evade the crowd for a couple of blocks he would be safe. Still there was little reason to think that anyone would connect him with the incident.

Men were coming down the alley. Powell clubbed his revolver.

"Musta gone up over Nugget's Mercantile," the sheriff was saying. "But there ain't been time for him to clear out. Cushman says it's Stanley Powell—the feller that runs the pack-train between here and Portland, but I'm bettin' that sergeant had a hand in it. Keep yore eyes peeled. Any dark streak might be—"

Stan Powell shrank farther back into the shadows, behind a heavy tile pipe. One searcher thought it worthwhile to do some intensive looking, though the sheriff sneered at the idea. Powell brought his gun down accurately and the man sank softly to the ground.

It seemed impossible to hope that the man's companions would not miss him, but for the moment their eyes were on the ladder which Bert had set against the wall. It had been a mistake to leave it there, but it seemed likely to work out all right now.

When the sheriff was well up the ladder's rounds, with at least one companion following, Powell exchanged hats with the man he had dropped. Then, crouching low, he ran down the alley.

One of the deputies gave an alarm and shots were fired. But by the time the sheriff was off the ladder and running along the alley, Stan Powell had melted into the crowd of angry Democrats, who were helping to hunt the offender . . .

* * *

Disturbing sounds pulled Stan reluctantly back from slumber. Against his cheek was something hard that smelled of horse and leather. When he shoved it aside he heard the rip of tearing pillowcase and a smothered tinkle. From the other side of the bed came nasal discords, reminiscent of a sawmill.

Sitting bolt upright, Powell pushed Shotwell's booted feet—belled spurs and all—from the bed. The snoring

ceased with a tremendous whoosh. Outside gunshots and blasting proclaimed the advent of election day.

Shotwell rolled over like a bull walrus and whisked his revolver from its holster.

"Get ready, Stan!" he advised hoarsely. "The red devils is aimin' to charge."

Stan put his hand over the hammer to prevent the weapon from being fired.

"Wake up, Luke!" he called. "You're still half asleep and half potted."

"Them words drip with injustice," Shotwell protested mournfully. "Yuh see in me a citizen who has been made more than considerable sober by the weight of events. If yuh don't believe it, I'll shake yore hand to prove it."

IGNORING this offer Stan demanded:

"Why couldn't you have picked a better time than this to get full of redeye?"

"I couldn't help it, if I was to do what yuh told me to do."

"You found the sergeant?"

"I did for a fact. Found him celebratin' like a lord. And he wouldn't listen to a thing I said until I was saturated as he was."

"Did he send a messenger?"

"Didn't have to. A runner come, orderin' him and his detail back to the fort. The sergeant's goin' to deliver the message hisself."

Stan stared. "You mean there are no troops at all in this town now?"

"Mebbe Drung's still here," Luke said. "He couldn't be found. . . . Say—"

"Say what?"

"I believe it was Drung that showed me how to get here. Funny, but I plumb forgot to tell him I was lookin' for him, too. Right then it seemed like it was the other way round." Shotwell ran stubby fingers through his shaggy hair. "There's something else I can't remember this mornin'. Somebody last night wanted me to tell yuh somethin' or other."

"Was it the sergeant?"

"Nope. 'Twasn't him. I recollect sayin' I knew yuh'd be powerful pleased at the communication. But shucks!" He licked his lips. "Stan, the cobwebs is festoonin' my throat something terrible. Now, if I had a snort of somethin' to cut 'em, mebbe I could remember—what—"

A thunderous knock on the door cut short the speech. When Stan threw it open, Corporal Drung and Bert were in the hall. The boy was crying.

"The devil and all's broke loose," crackled Drung. "I'd give a year of my life to be out of the Army right now."

"What's happened?" asked Stan.

Drung placed a hand gently on Bert's shoulder.

"One of Rolfe's men murdered the kid's uncle. They called it resistin' arrest. Huh! Mat Davis didn't have no time to resist nothin'. If it goes on like this, there'll be a murder on every corner before night. Rolfe's out to scare the Republicans away from the polls. He'll do it, too, if he keeps on. A lot of the Caligon men are for Lincoln, but they're too scattered out to make a stand. A lot won't be in till toward evenin'. Mat Davis got in late last night with five hundred head of beef. Now he's dead."

"What about the Democrats?" demanded Powell.

"They're gettin' a big vote. Buckner's pullin' somethin' snaky over on 'em. He's been to the polls twice with bunches of men. Some of the same fellers each time. There's a Republican among the election judges, but they've got him scared to death. By jumpin' horntoads, I believe Buckner's votin' dead men!"

"I'm sure he is," Stan agreed. "We saw him out at the cemetery, gathering his list, but we didn't catch on

then what he was up to."

"And what good does it do us that we savvy?" groaned Drung.

"We've got to get hold of the ballot machinery somehow—and Buckner's list along with it."

"Three men and a boy talkin' about takin' a town," jeered Shotwell. "That's what it all adds up to. Buckner and Rolfe control the camp—and what a chance *we* got!"

"Mebbe I could round up a few stockmen," suggested Drung. "They ain't goin' to be any too happy over the deal Mat Davis got."

"I could help," offered Bert. "Ours ain't the only family that hates Rolfe."

"Good," approved Powell. "That's the spirit. I'll order breakfast sent up here to the four of us and we'll do some planning."

CHAPTER VI

The Siege

WAITING in the partial shelter of the brush in the creek bottom at the edge of town, Stan Powell kept his eye on the cottonwood from which Bert was to signal when he saw Buckner approach the polling place with another bunch of illegal voters. Balloting was being conducted at the courthouse, which made the element of surprise a much harder problem.

Powell wondered if he were a fool. Rolfe and Buckner were engaged in criminal acts, but proving their guilt was another matter. If he should fail to get hold of the registration books, along with the bogus ballots already cast, Buckner and the sheriff might turn the tables, making him and the men who aided him, fugitives from justice.

Behind him were Drung and the dozen cattlemen he had assembled. The corporal was swearing softly. Suspense was hard, and one false move now would be fatal.

The cottonwood over by the courthouse was shaking. Powell straightened in his saddle. He could see the boy clambering nimbly upward. Soon he was perched in a high crotch, waving his cap.

"Time to cut loose?" asked Drung.

"Wait," cautioned Powell. "We've got to give Luke and the men with him a chance to empty the cattle pens."

"There's the dust fannin' up already," remarked Drung. "Look at that, would yuh? Pards, in two bucks of a bronc, there's goin' to be a merry party up town."

From the direction of the stockyards came cowboy yells and the crack of guns. The cloud of dust built higher and wider. It moved rapidly into Caligon's main street, then up it. Now Powell could hear the click of horns, the pounding of hoofs. Dogs barked, women screamed. The bellow of frightened cattle mounted to a roar.

Time to go. Stan Powell waved his arm in a forward motion and galloped toward the courthouse. Men would see them coming, but the confusion caused by the spilling of a thousand head of cattle through the business district would help to cover the significance of their approach. Surprise was the essence of their scheme. What they did must be done quickly!

A block from the courthouse the party split, Drung leading half the men around toward the rear of the building in order to cut off any possible escape from that direction, and Powell striking out for the front entrance.

As his party whirled toward Main

Street, bawling cattle smashed through the picket fence and poured across the courthouse yard. Steers, maddened by excitement, treed prominent citizens. Benches were knocked over. Buggies were upturned and teams stampeded.

Out of the dusty maelstrom rode Shotwell, in his eyes the light of battle.

"Now for the ballots!" he roared.

Powell nodded. Stirrup to stirrup they fought their way toward the courthouse steps. The voting was being conducted in the courthouse hall. Over the heads of those who had taken refuge on the steps Powell could see the judges seated at a narrow table. The ballot-box was before them, with a pair of armed men standing guard. Two of Rolfe's deputies, without doubt.

A group of men, accompanied by Buckner, who were in the act of voting paused, bewildered and puzzled by the cattle. The clerk held the list of names that Buckner had gathered in the cemetery. That, and the ballot-box, were the two pieces of evidence that must be obtained.

POWELL'S horse was up the steps before Buckner sensed what was happening. Snatching the list from the clerk, he shouted to the pair guarding the ballot-box. One seized the box and started running toward the rear of the hall, the other guard close upon his heels.

With the front doors blocked by horses and steers, Powell and several of his men jumped from their saddles and charged the hall. The table was kicked over. Shots were fired. Men used chairs for clubs.

Buckner, spear-heading the resistance, led the judges into one of the rooms opening off the hall. Powell and two of his companions forced their way in and a hand-to-hand battle followed. By the time he had knocked Buckner to his knees and

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secured the paper, the furniture in the room was smashed to kindling.

When all other resistance had ceased, Luke Shotwell was still shaking the clerk. The man's eyes bulged. His head blurred like a punching bag. When the registration book flew from the clerk's grasp, Shotwell flung him flat on the floor.

"There—blast yore sin-shriveled soul!" he panted. "Mebbe yuh'll think twict before bitin' me agin!"

Stan Powell picked up the registration book and placed the cemetery list inside. As he closed the book, Drung entered the room, the blood dripping down his face from a gash at the edge of his hair.

"Better break Buckner's neck now," he advised. "This'll likely be yore best chance. All the cattle that ain't killed have been chased out of the yard. The nags have all been shot and the sheriff's gang's closin' in. Mighty funny how quick they got organized."

In short order Stan Powell discovered how effectively the sheriff's forces were closing in. Tree trunks, brick walls, and roofs of buildings had all become sources of steady, sniping fire. The sheriff led one half-hearted

sortie against the courthouse, but that was all. Night would be the real testing time.

Two imminent perils worried Powell. One was an acute shortage of ammunition. The other was lack of water. The nearest supply was a well at the back of the courthouse. To reach this without being shot was a physical impossibility. Help must come soon or their plight would be desperate.

Near sundown, while passing the room where the prisoners were held, a speech of Buckner's brought Powell up short.

"This heah mob of wild-eyed cowpunchers are expectin' other stockmen to come and help them. They'll be disappointed. Powell's simply given those who followed him oveh to slaughteh."

Buckner was smart. Spreading doubt and sedition in the hearts of men was his life's vocation. Without apparently addressing the man on guard, his remarks had been intended for that man. And already uncertainty was stamped on the guard's features. Between the strain of the present danger and Buckner's smooth lying, the man's faith and loyalty would soon dissolve. Then he would be ready for any act of treason suggested by Buckner.

Calling another man to take this guard's place, Stan Powell stepped into the room.

"CLEVER talk, Buckner," he said. "But not convincing. There are plenty of Republicans in Caligon who'll gladly do anything to clean up the unholy political mess in this town and save their friends."

"Suh, the Republicans heah are outnumbered and without organization. They have no moah fight in them than rabbits."

"There are other camps with plenty of strong Union men in them!" reminded Powell.

Buckner smiled. "Correct, suh. But Sheriff Rolfe has thrown a cordon around the camp. No Republican will leave it until yuh are all dead. Afteh that, what mattah who comes? The court records will show that a bunch of renegades received theah just deserts at the hands of the officeh and his deputies. Just that and nothing moah. Suh, you are as incompetent in wah as yuh are in love."

Powell's lids narrowed. "Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Buckner threw back his head, laughing. "Haven't yuh wondehed how the sheriff was so well prepared foh youah move? Miss Gahneh was delighted by the opportunity to help the Southern cause and at the same time teach a mannehless Yankee never to force his way into a Southern lady's room."

Blood pounded in Powell's temples. Had Annis Garner helped to trap him? Though he fought for control, his tones were revealing.

"Doesn't a cur like you ever come straight out with anything?" he demanded.

Buckner showed an answering anger. "Suh, none but Abolitionist swine could talk as yuh have! A gentleman would have fought with pistols."

Powell's body drove forward.

"By heavens, now that you've started, you'll explain what Miss Garner did, or I'll squeeze the lying tongue from your mouth!"

There was no fear in Buckner's eyes. Only implacable hatred.

"Suh," he drawled, "it's a pleasure to explain how a Southern song-bird trapped a Northern numbskull. And it was the boy who made it possible. Miss Gahneh saw that you were using him. She's known the carrot-topped little devil eveh since she came to Caligon. When she asked him, he explained how yuh expected to raid the courthouse. Then she immediately notified Mistah Rolfe. If yuh had been fifteen minutes lateh, yuh would not have reached the doahs of this

building. As it is, yuh'll neveh leave them alive. . . . "

Night came, and with it the light from several fires and innumerable torches. There was not one dark patch through which the men besieged in the courthouse might hope to escape. The circle of deputies tightened. The crash of rifles grew louder and more incessant.

The hammering of the defenders' guns made a ringing in Stan Powell's ears. Perhaps they were death bells in his brain, he thought. He did not want to die—certainly not until he knew the truth about Annis Garner, whether or not she had betrayed him.

The shadows at the window next to the one where Powell was stationed stirred. A dark figure detached itself from the gloom and floated toward him. He heard Luke Shotwell's voice.

"Stan, I reckon this here card game's shapin' for the showdown pretty fast. Then it's gotta be each hog look out fer his own bacon. I don't predict none of us will roam farther than the street, but I'm shore plannin' on gittin' Cushman before I'm done. He's out there, for I seen—"

HE broke off, coughing. A second later strangling fumes were in Powell's throat and he, too, choked. Brimstone! The enemy had burrowed under the floor and were burning sulphur.

Drung was roaring his indignation at the top of his lungs. Then his indignation died in a racking cough.

Powell risked striking a match and saw streams of greenish vapor coming through the cracks in the floor. It was only a matter of minutes before it would be impossible to live in the place. The wind which, for an instant, blew the flames away, died, and the stinging within Stan Powell's lungs grew sharper.

With an oath, Shotwell lunged for a window, but Powell jerked him back.

"The hall, man! Go for the hall!"

Conditions there were but little better. Fumes were everywhere. Everyone was coughing.

As Powell started to order the prisoners released, he saw a choking man, forgetful of everything but his need of air, dash into the yard. The crowd burst into a savage roar. A dozen rifles flashed and the man went down in a twitching heap.

"We'd just as well all do the same thing!" gasped Shotwell. "It's better'n stranglin'."

Most of the defenders surged forward, but Powell still barred the way. "Wait!" he shouted. "I hear a bugle."

"So do I—shore as shootin'!" echoed Drung.

Now they all caught the silver rage of a charge. On the street the crowd was surging back in howling waves. A column of blue-clad cavalry swept in view with sabers flashing in the light from the fires.

It was all over in no time. With smoke-induced tears streaming from his eyes Drung pounded Stan Powell on the back.

"I knew the sarg would deliver the message!" he roared. "It's Major Curwood, hisself, with a full company. Now it'll be the turn of them Democrats to suffer and they ought to suffer plenty."

"Heah, Yankee!" a voice nearby announced. "I've got something moah foh yuh."

Powell whirled. Buckner was standing so close that his outstretched arm was but a foot away. In his hand was a cocked revolver. The politician was smiling.

"Suh, a gentleman always keeps his promises."

Stanley Powell threw himself sideward, but the revolver followed his movement. Smoke lashed from the muzzle. A terrific force sledge-hammered against his chest. Faces, sounds, light—all were suddenly doused in utter blackness.

CHAPTER VII

Unexpected Title

FOR months the pistol ball that had been fired into Stan Powell's chest by Douglas Buckner, had left young Powell too near death for full comprehension of what was taking place. As clarity of thought finally returned he became concerned about the fate of Annis Garner, and the final outcome of affairs at Caligon.

From the army doctor who attended him at Fort Sierra, he learned that Miss Garner had disappeared the night of the battle at the courthouse, along with Buckner, Sheriff Rolfe, and other principals in the election conspiracy. There had been no direct attempt to couple the girl with the plotters but a doubt had been created when she had vanished at the same time they had.

Coupled with Powell's worry over Annis was an ever-increasing apprehension concerning the fate of the Nation. Each month of spring and winter brought new concern. Powell read in the Sacramento and San Francisco papers how the South had seized Fort Moultrie and Castle Pinckney. The Secessionists had taken possession of the revenue cutter, *William Aiken,* at Charleston. Then the arsenal had fallen into Southern hands.

Fuming with impatience to be up and ready to take part in the impending conflict, Powell had followed the long list of Rebel seizures. In the aggregate the forts so captured had cost the Federal Government nearly six million dollars. And the repeated successes emboldened the South still more. Every sign for months had pointed toward a national catastrophe.

As the wound healed, inner unrest drove Powell from his bed, but the spike-bearded Army surgeon refused to grant his discharge. Today he was due for another examination. This time, if he were not released, Powell meant to take French leave.

He glanced at his watch. It was time any moment now for the hospital orderly to summon him. He heard a step in the corridor, then a non-com stepped inside and gave a clipped, military message. Major Curwood wished to see Mr. Powell at once.

Powell followed the orderly to the commander's quarters. When he stepped inside the Post surgeon was talking with the major. Curwood was still in early middle life, but the worry of past months had aged him. His shoulders had a tired set, and his lips were pressed in weary lines, despite his military bearing. He arose and gripped Powell's hand.

"Lieutenant Powell, I am glad to learn from Dr. Snell that you are fit for active duty."

Stan Powell's head whirled.

"Why—why the Lieutenant?" he faltered. "I don't understand."

FROM his desk the major produced a piece of heavy parchment.

"Emergencies like these demand that we dispense with much red tape," he explained. "Here is your commission. It is the Army's recognition of what you did at Caligon. The service needs leaders."

"Major," Powell said, from a full heart, "I am deeply grateful, but I had intended to offer my services in the East."

"Wanted to be in the thick of fighting, eh?" Major Curwood smiled. "Well, you will be—here. In fact, I am about to start you on a job more dangerous than front-line fighting." The major paused, drummed nervously on his desk, then went on: "Briefly, the situation is this. The

South needs cash for buying war material. Gold from the Western mining camps is one of the easiest ways to procure it, providing they can get it out."

"You think the South is attempting to do this?"

"Yes. Union secret agents operating in the South report that right now a detachment of Confederate cavalry is operating in the Northwest. They are trying to secure five or six millions in new-mined gold and smuggle it through in a single shipment. If

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they succeed, it is believed that either France or England has agreed to come openly to their assistance. The reasoning behind this is that ability to move that much gold through Union-held territory would prove the weakness of the Federal Government and likewise assure foreign manufacturers of pay for whatever they might sell to the South."

"And you think the robberies occurring at the camps north of here are due to the operation of this Confederate cavalry?" asked Powell.

"No, I do not. The Southerners are brave men and worthy foes. They would never stoop to the sort of butchery that is being carried on by those desperadoes. But—suppose they have trouble acquiring the gold they need? Then it is possible that the representatives of the Confederate Government might be compelled to get the gold anywhere they could, without too many questions asked. That is where this man Burr, whom you mentioned, and Cushman come in. They'll do the murdering and stealing, hoping to dispose of their swag to the South. You see the possibilities?"

"I certainly do," Powell said grimly. "Did the authorities try to locate Burr?"

"Yes, but he evaded them. Vanished somewhere into the back country. We must get to the bottom of both Burr's and the Confederate troops' maneuvers. We must know if there is any buyer and seller relationship established between them. We've got to learn by what method the South proposes to smuggle this gold out. Are you ready to tackle such a colossal task, Lieutenant Powell?"

"I'm more than willing, Major Curwood!" Powell said eagerly. "I'm anxious to get at it."

"You understand that you will have mortal enemies after you and you must be on guard against them, day and night?"

"I would expect to do that."

Relieved satisfaction spread across the major's face.

"I felt sure before that you were the man we needed. Now I am even more positive. Every detail will be left to you. That includes the selection of men and supplies to take with you."

"I wouldn't want more than one or two men along," Powell said thoughtfully, "and they must be men who can be trusted in any emergency. Corporal Drung is one I should like to have."

"You may take him," the major promptly agreed.

"I think we'd better travel as traders," suggested Powell. "I spent several years among the Indians while my father was trading with them. I

know many of the Shastas, Modocs, Klamaths, and some of the tribes from still farther north. They would think it was perfectly natural for me to be doing the same work that my father did."

"Good idea," approved the major. "And I am sure some of them are working for our enemies. Perhaps these acquaintances of yours may prove the key to the situation."

AN orderly stepped into the room and saluted smartly.

"A man named Luke Shotwell wishes to see Major Curwood at once. He claims it's very urgent."

"Very good. Bring him in."

Bedraggled but cheery, Shotwell strolled into the room. There was dried mud on his boots and more on his clothing. Even the silver steer's head on his belt buckle was spattered, and the brim of his hat carried sun-baked cakes of dirt.

"Howdy, Major," he said airily. "Oh, hello, Stan! Shore seems edifying to see yuh both again. I got on the track of them Indians like yuh asked, Major. And shore as skunks smell bad, them's Apaches. Never knew 'em to be up this far before, but I reckon there has to be a first time for everything."

The officer frowned. "Is that all you had to say when you insisted on seeing me at once?"

Military dignity and authority left Shotwell totally unimpressed. He smiled genially at the officer.

"That's practically all, Officer. Fact of the matter is it was Stan, here, that I perticular wanted to see. Yuh know, Stan, last night back on Owl Creek I helped a placer miner to drink his last pint of whisky. Whilst we was celebratin' it come to me plain as day who the lady was, and what she wanted me to tell yuh."

Powell stared. "Are you talking about the same thing you mentioned back in Caligon last November? Something somebody wanted you to tell me, and you forgot?"

"That's right, Stan. I knowed sooner or later that I'd recollect. The minute it come to me, I jumped on a hoss and rode for the fort."

"Then let's hear it!"

Shotwell started to speak. His lips parted but, instead of forming a word, his lower jaw sagged until his mouth looked like a badger hole. The confidence drained from his face, to be replaced by blank dismay. He swallowed until his Adam's apple jigged in his neck like a pump plunger. Beads of moisture accumulated on his leathery skin.

"Well?" urged Powell.

But a groan of incredulity escaped Shotwell.

"My gosh, Stan! It took so long gettin' here, and I lost so much time lookin' for yuh that—well, dern it all, I've clean forgot agin!"

CHAPTER VIII

At Bay

LOOK, Stan! Over on that ridge!"

Luke Shotwell's voice vibrated with excitement. After fifteen minutes of worming through the brush he and Stan Powell were within a stone's throw of the narrow promontory of barren rock that jutted out from a timbered hill.

On this point were two Indian riders, the evening wind ruffling the manes and tails of their mounts. The pair were staring intently down the trail that led northwest toward the Oregon border. Upon that slender, hoof-chopped thread of earth Stan could see the outfit with which they

had left Fort Sierra, now crawling in and out among the trees.

Only Corporal Drung was with the horses, but the elevated bundles that had been tied upon the backs of Powell's and Shotwell's mounts looked, in the twilight, as though all three were in the valley.

"Apache scouts," whispered Shotwell. "And we fooled 'em clean!"

Savagely fit were the two Indians silhouetted against the saffron afterglow. Around their foreheads were wound bands of colored cloth. Scanty breech clouts encircled their muscular loins. Under them, instead of saddles were only blankets, held in place by rawhide surcingles. Rifles rested across the backs of their mounts. Every movement they made held a sinister grace that was common to all predatory creatures.

Shotwell was swearing softly. "By criminy, I wish we had the Maj. here now. He didn't believe me when I said there was Apaches up here in this country. Huh! I've had too many of my relatives lose their hair not to know an Apache when I see one. Stan, them Indian scouts was brought up here from Arizony by the Johnny Rebs that's after gold!"

"We've got to capture 'em," said Powell. "They might give us some of the information we need."

"It's goin' to be hard. Only way to do it is to put a bullet through the red devils, then question 'em afterward."

"You wouldn't murder them in cold blood, without giving them a chance to surrender?"

"I ain't got no scruples about killin' an Apache," growled Shotwell. "There's never been a shore enough truce between them and the whites. You get a bead on the front one and I'll take the one behind."

Stan knew that his companion's attitude was a common one, perhaps even a practical method of dealing with these human wolves, yet he could not bring himself to shoot from ambush. Keeping his man covered, he stepped into the open and shouted.

Never had he seen such explosive muscular response. Horses and riders both blurred with action. Shotwell's gun roared and the rear Apache fell backward across his pony's rump, then rolled to the ground. Powell, who had hesitated a moment longer, missed.

With a whoop of defiance the other savage quirted his pony away. Powell fired a second time and the horse, shot through the neck, fell, pitching his rider upon the rocks. The Indian lay still for a moment, then started crawling toward the timber, dragging one leg.

"Come on!" urged Shotwell. "If we don't kill the cuss before he gets to the brush, we never will."

Powell was close enough to hear the breathing of the wounded Apache when a dozen whites and Indians burst from the timber above him. The man in the lead was Cushman. The two scouts had been trapped!

WHIRLING, Powell plunged down the slope, the air around him alive with lead. Ahead was Shotwell, bouncing over rocks like a rubber ball. A glance cast in the direction of the valley showed that Drung had heard the shooting and had halted his horses.

Risking a look to the rear Stan was relieved to find that his pursuers were not gaining. With luck he might—

The thought died unfinished. Below him Shotwell was in the act of hurdling a fallen tree when one of his spur chains caught on the stump of a tree, throwing him headlong. The slope was terrifically steep and he struck the ground in a ball, then rolled forty feet before bringing up with a thud against a huge fir.

He lay motionless for a moment, then gave a convulsive jerk, jumped to his feet and started on, only to bring himself up short. Motioning

for Powell to stop, he scuttled back to the huge fir and wriggled into a hole in its side.

"Come on in, Stan!" he called. "There's plenty of room. And we can't go on. Our path ended in a fifty-foot jump-off."

"We'd better jump than stay here," insisted Powell.

But even as he spoke he crawled in after his companion. The cavity was much larger than it had at first appeared to be. Around them were chunks of decaying wood from which crawled beetles and spiders. A pack-rat's old nest was beneath their feet, and wood mice had taken possession of the mass, which was alive and squirming.

"Don't stand in front of that big hole," cautioned Shotwell. "Them devils'll fill her full of lead like she was a hollow tooth."

He was right, but some means of firing on the attackers was necessary. Powell pulled out his knife and dug away the rotten wood, making a hole about the height of his shoulder. The outside shell of sound wood was relatively thin and, with a little more chipping, he soon had a loophole. On the other side Shotwell found a knot-hole that served the same purpose.

Outside they could hear movements among the vines and bushes. To keep the attackers back, they fired at the sounds. In return bullets buried themselves in the tree. Some of the slugs penetrated the hard, outer shell and knocked down chunks of inside punk until the air was filled with dust.

Then a suspicious stillness came. Stan could hear a slithering motion in the darkness. Someone was crawling forward on hands and knees. He fired at the creeping enemy. Something swished through the air and a taunting Apache howl stung his eardrums.

The swishing object came through the hole in the tree and became a buzzing, lashing horror.

A rattlesnake! Powell felt the serpent's head strike against his boot. Instinctively he kicked.

From Shotwell came an oath of terror.

"Stan, the thing's hangin' on to my clothes!"

The snake lashed Stan Powell's face with its rattles. A coil the size of a man's wrist and cold as marble struck him on the side. The utter blackness added to his horror.

"Get back from the hole, Luke!" he shouted. "I'm lighting a match."

He drew the match head across his boot, and the match sputtered into flame. It revealed Shotwell, leaning back against the tree, sweat gushing from every pore. His face held a nauseated dread for around his neck was twisted two loops of the reptile, which appeared to be hanging to his chest.

Both of his hands were wrapped about the reptile's neck and he was squeezing with all his strength.

"He ain't got me so far!" panted Shotwell. "His fangs went through my jacket and caught in my wool shirt. Keep his infernal rattles from filin' back an' forth on my teeth an' I'll kill him yet."

POWELL grabbed the threshing tail. The light went out but he held on, unwinding the coils from Shotwell's throat and encouraging him all the while.

"You're getting him, Luke. He's about gone."

"He's squirmin' considerable less'n he done awhile back," panted Shotwell, "but it ain't no time to take chances. This snake's got enough poison in him to fill a milk bucket. Light another match, Stan."

"It's dangerous, Luke."

"So's this! I can't hold on forever. Get yore pistol ready and give us more light!"

The second match flared and showed Shotwell holding the snake at

arm's length, his body fairly shaking with the force applied in his grip.

"Quick, Stan!" he choked. "Shove your gun muzzle right agin it, just above my fingers, and blow the whole head away!"

Powell pressed his revolver barrel against the glistening scales and pulled the trigger. The venomous head disappeared in a gush of flame.

From the shadows came Buckner's voice, amused, yet threatening.

"This has been better entertainment than a show, Powell. But Cushman says the Apaches know dozens of more interesting tricks than this one. I can guarantee they'll keep yo'-all awake all night."

And with the dawn! It was better not to think of that. To die swiftly, cut down cleanly by bullets would be a cause for thankfulness, but they were much more likely to fall victims of Apache vengeance. And Apache vengeance was a thing to make brave men cringe.

Stan Powell did not want to die. He was young, and life was good. Strangely in the bullet-riddled blackness his thoughts turned to Annis Garner—more strongly than they had turned in months. In some way she was connected with the events of this night, he was sure. He could not believe, though, that she had guessed that he would suffer because of anything she had done, yet she had a part in it all.

Buckner's hatred was not entirely because of his zeal in serving the South. Powell was equally sure of that now. Jealousy was spurring the man on in his effort to wipe out one whom he considered a rival. Stan Powell, however, instinctively felt that Buckner was not a man for whom Annis ever had or ever would care. But the other man—the one who had slid from her window at the hotel. It was easy for Stan Powell to understand Buckner's hatred of himself when he thought of that man who had gone out the hotel window.

Outside an Indian began shouting. Powell fancied that the haranguing was for the benefit of himself and Shotwell.

"Yuh savvy Apache, Stan?" asked Shotwell.

"Don't know a word of it."

"Yuh're lucky. I do, so I know this here yellin' buck's a brother of the Injun I killed. Up til now, the the gentlest treatment he's thought up is drivin' picket pins down our throats. Which bein' the case, I've got one bullet thet won't be wasted on a redskin."

Stan Powell agreed. Self-destruction was preferable to capture. . . .

Some time after midnight lightning flashes sent crimson gushes along the mountain side. Then treetops bent to a rushing gale. The dead stub in which they crouched was filled

[*Turn page*]

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with creakings and swayed ominously. The rain, beginning with grape-size splatterings, increased in violence until there was but one sound — the thrum and swish of lashing water. Powell shoved his hand outside and found it was like sticking it underneath a waterfall. A cloudburst! From over on the right, where the ravine was deepest, came an unmistakable roar. A flood was rolling down the draw, sweeping everything before it. Below them was a booming that jarred the rock on which they stood.

It was the boulder-filled torrent, cascading over the cliff.

Powell seized Shotwell by the arm.

"Come on, Luke!" he shouted." This is our best chance. Let's go."

"Which way?" howled Shotwell.

"South along the top of the cliff. We couldn't climb the hill if we wanted to."

"But that's toward the flood. Yuh aimin' to jump it?"

"No. Fly over it. But watch that you don't slide off."

THE going was even harder than Powell had anticipated. Though the fiercest of the storm had passed, the downpour was still terrific. In places the thin soil had been swept clean from the hillside, leaving sheets of slippery stone, steep as a roof, and ending in a sheer cliff front.

By hanging to roots and branches they swung across otherwise impassable gutters. Only once did Powell see the Apache.

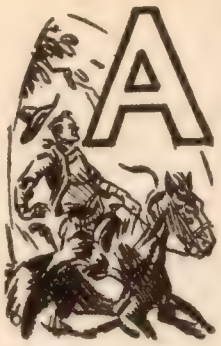
The Indian was plastered to the down side of a pine less than a rod away, when a blinding bolt of lightning exposed him.

Jerking his revolver from its holster, Powell fired by guess into the inky blackness that followed the flash. If his bullet found its mark he would never know.

Even the sound of the shots was lost in the uproar.

CHAPTER IX

Capture



AS THE first pale quiverings of breaking day appeared, Powell and Shotwell stood on the edge of the wash. High banks of debris were on each side of the torrent's runway. Only a small stream of soupy fluid still poured over the brim.

Powell crept to the edge of the cliff and looked down. Scores of pine trees had plunged over the top and lay, mud-covered, at the bottom—like giant jackstraws.

One good-sized tree had gone over crown-first and had snapped its trunk on striking the bottom. Now the remainder lay propped against the cliff, root end up. If it were possible to reach the butt, the tree would form a means of getting down.

But the snarl of roots was ten or fifteen feet below the rim where Powell stood. Also it was near the center of the flood's runway, making it a good twenty feet out over the scoured stone from where the two men stood. Without hesitation, Powell dropped his rifle into the mud below and started climbing back up along the edge of the wash.

"What in all tarnation are yuh aimin' at?" demanded Shotwell.

Powell grinned. "I'm going to try to get down, Luke."

"Yuh'll be killed, shore as guns."

"I'd rather risk it than wait for the Indians," Powell declared grimly.

Crouching on the edge of the gutter he seized a limb and swung out over the slick stone as far as possible before letting go. Then he attempted to cling to the surface with hands and

toes. He was sliding! But as he slid, he worked desperately to reach a point farther out. There was a snag of some sort on the very lip around which the water parted. If only he could get in line with that!

The sludge was deeper. It piled up around his arms and knees. When his hands slipped the stuff shoved heavily against his breast and built upward to his chin.

Going faster now! Have to keep his eyes clean or he would miss that snag. Had to catch it to balance himself for a drop on the tree roots below.

A stone the size of a muskmelon came bounding down through the mud. It seemed to be going slow, with streams of mud flying from it each time it left the slime. Powell thought he could surely twist himself out of its reach, yet try as he would, it struck his thigh a glancing blow in passing and when he tried to use that leg again, he could not. A muscle seemed to have been paralyzed.

He rolled, practically helpless, after that. His legs went over the brink and his body was ready to follow. Mud was in his mouth and hair, but he winked his eyes clear.

There was the snag, within an arm's reach. He threw both arms about it. The mush-thick liquid sprayed over him but, looking down, he could see the stump squarely below him. The barkless roots stretched out like a dozen sets of tangled fingers. In the center was a cup that bubbled and plopped.

A little to the left! He kicked and found that both his legs moved again. One more swing. His hands slipped, and with a splash he landed safely on the stump.

Shotwell, who had been watching from the top, already was preparing to follow. What had seemed like a long time while making the descent himself, took only a few seconds for his companion.

AS POWELL caught hold of Shotwell and dragged him to a better position, his eyes registered movements above. Three Indians and one white man were watching them. And what an ideal target they must make, clinging to the dripping tangle of roots!

"Stan," panted Shotwell, "this is another time when the cards is stacked agin—"

But Stan Powell did not hear, for he was watching a miracle take place above. One of the Indians clutched at his chest, took a blind, forward step and hurtled over the cliff. The others with him scattered. Then Powell saw that from below came three white puffs of smoke, drifting upward. A fourth was just leaping from the barrel of a rifle. Drung had come to their rescue!

Though there was a sniping fire from above they made it to the bottom of the log. The corporal, standing beside a big cottonwood, grinned at them.

"Pretty tight spots, boys. But between us, we outmaneuvered the devils. S-a-y, what's that?"

A line of mounted men swept out of the timber from behind and surrounded them. The column moved with the precision of crack cavalry and, while the majority wore nondescript clothing, the captain and two or three others wore the butternut-colored field uniforms of Confederate cavalry officers.

Surrender was automatic. A ring of riders shoved toward the captain who surveyed his catch with appraising eyes.

"Gentlemen," he said, to Powell and Shotwell, with curt, professional efficiency, "I take it you were trying to effect a strategic withdrawal after contact with enemies."

The captain was young—not over twenty-five. And he was handsome. But hang his infernal neck, he was laughing at them!

"A most unusal retreat," the Confederate officer was saying. "And the rear guard action of your big corporal was splendid. Who were you having trouble with?"

"Some of yore blasted scouts!" exploded Shotwell. "The devil with a bunch of guerillas that hire skunks like Buckner and Cushman to help 'em!"

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Not so fast, my friend. Neither of those worthies belong to my command. In fact, my prejudices are just as strong against men of their type as yours are. Who are you, please?"

There was no sense in trying to conceal their identity. The captain would find out anyhow. But when Stan Powell told his name, the captain became all attention.

"So you're the man who organized the cattlemen so efficiently in Caligon? I heard about the battle of the ballots. Who hasn't?"

The captain frowned thoughtfully, then dismounted and strode toward a large fir, motioning for Powell to follow him. Beneath its shade he removed his slouch service hat and ran strong fingers through the damp gold of his curly hair.

"Do you have me placed yet?" he asked. "Or were you too furious that night at the Bedrock Hotel to recognize anyone?"

POWELL was instantly and hostilely alert. This was the man who had slipped through Annis Garner's window—the man who had destroyed his pack-train!

"I see you know who I am," the captain observed, "but find it unpleasant."

"Would I be expected to rejoice at seeing the man who stole my property and killed my packers?"

"Not so fast, Powell. Neither I nor the members of my command had anything to do with that affair. We Southerners are soldiers, not guerillas."

"There were Apache scouts with Buckner and Cushman," Powell said defiantly.

"That is possible," the captain admitted. "Handling savages is always ticklish business. A few men deserted our force and presumably joined up with the outlaws. You have always had plenty of desperadoes in this country, Mr. Powell. But I did not call you over here to debate issues. What I want to know is the whereabouts of Miss Annis Garner."

"Why ask me?" snapped Powell. "I haven't seen her since the day she helped Sheriff Rolfe trap me in the Caligon courthouse."

The captain looked searchingly at his prisoner.

"You really believe that?"

"Why shouldn't I? The sheriff was tipped off about our plans and she was the person in the best position to give the information. No, I have not seen her since Buckner shot me."

The captain looked frankly baffled.

"I believe," he said, "that you are stating your honest convictions. But you are mistaken, sir. Miss Garner is not the kind to doublecross a friend. When you say you have never seen her my worry is increased. For neither have I since election day. Major Curwood's forces must have apprehended her. She must be held somewhere in a Federal prison."

"I doubt it," said Powell. "I would certainly have been informed of it if she had been."

"She can't have been killed," muttered the captain. "I won't believe that."

Never had Stan seen a face grow more haggard. But the same alarm made his own heart pound. What if Annis Garner were dead?

A wave of fear engulfed him. He loved her. No matter what she had done, he loved her. Never to find her again would be the worst fate that life could hold.

"Lieutenant Powell," the captain

said, his voice kindly, "we seem to have one common bond in our interest in my—in Miss Garner. I am Stuart Lamont, Captain in the Confederate Cavalry. Under other circumstances, I should have enjoyed your friendship. As it is, I must hold you and your companions prisoners. Under field conditions your lot will be rather hard, but not much worse than that of my own men. It is also necessary to remind you that any attempt to escape will mean you will be shot."

At a motion from the officer, guards stepped up and laid hands on Powell. The captain wheeled and strode swiftly away. . . .

THREE men trusssed hand and foot, with their backs propped against a log. For hours it had been like that, with each busy with his own bitter thoughts. To Stan Powell the steady pacing of the guard only added to the rawness of his own nerves.

Only four days since receiving his commission at Fort Sierra and already he was captured—a failure! His chance for service to the Union had been great, and he had muffed it.

Then, in his lowest moments, his courage rallied. Always while men lived, there was hope.

The Confederates were not leaving until either late that night or early the following morning. To amuse themselves the cavalry men had turned to cards, and half a dozen games were in progress on saddle blankets and pieces of canvas.

Powell noted that his own guard kept casting longing glances toward the players. Catching the fellow's eye, he smiled.

"Hey, Johnny," he said, "your captain and lieutenants are out of camp. Let's get organized for a game over here. I've got several hundred dollars in my pockets. Both my partners are carrying money. It can't do us any good while we board with you Confederates, so why don't we all have

He threw his arms about the snag as the mush-thick liquid sprayed him (Chapter IX)

some fun out of it now?"

The guard's features sharpened to a hungry longing. But he shook his head.

"I can't, Yank," he muttered from the corner of his mouth. "Be court-martialed if I did."

Drung snorted jeeringly. "Fine outfit you work for, Reb. What difference does it make whether yuh keep sloggin' back and forth all the time? Yuh can get a game leg any time, can't yuh? Have yore sergeant put another man to hoofin' it. Then get in and play with us. Mebbe there's some good poker expert in yore gang and we can join up."

Drung did not know what Powell's plan was, but he was ready to support anything to relieve the monotony. The guard wavered, then called a sergeant. After some minutes of consultation, the non-com gave the prisoners a crooked smile.

"All right, Chris," he said to the guard. "We'll put another man to totin' the gun. If the Yanks want to lose their money havin' a good time, we ought to give 'em a chance."

CHAPTER X

Out of the Frying Pan

NEWS of the new development spread fast as the poker game started and progressed. Soon many more cavalrymen were gathered about the players.

At first, after releasing the wrists of the prisoners, great caution was exerted. Then, as interest in the game increased, the tension relaxed. After all, what could three unarmed men do while surrounded by their captors? And the gold piled upon the saddle-blanket gripped the guards with magnetic force.

It was after sundown, with the Rebel player several hundred dollars to the good, when Stan Powell slipped a knife from the clothing of a Confederate and managed to sever the bonds that held his ankles, without being seen. A nudge appraised Drung of what was going on. In the deepening shadows Powell slid the blade along the edge of the log, into the corporal's reach. A little later he saw Drung pass it on to Shotwell.

Between them they lost a hundred dollars more in covering the maneuver. The Southerners grew more friendly each time their comrades won. They were bantering now, urging the prisoners to join up with them and learn the fine points of poker.

When darkness ran the spots upon the cards together, someone built a fire and kept it fed with dry cones and pitch. And when a messenger came in to report that the captain and his aides were on a reconnoitering expedition that might last all night there was a complete let-down of discipline. Troopers rolled up stones and boxes for seats. Two even carried over kegs of black powder to serve as chairs.

Not all joined the circle about the players. Some sat about the fire and sang songs of the South. Others argued about how many months it would take General Lee to lick the Yanks. A few of the Apache scouts also were in evidence, but kept mostly to themselves. One of the soldiers, seeing Powell looking at the Indians, grinned and said:

"We don't like 'em eitheh, Yank, but they shuah come in handy movin' pack-trains across a desert."

Stan Powell was wondering if the moment had come to make the desperate break for freedom when a man dashed up.

"Look alive, men!" he snapped. "The captain's comin'."

The troopers sprang to their feet, but there was no time to scatter. Already several riders were entering the circle of firelight. The thud of hoofs and the squeak of saddle leather was upon them. Firelight glinted on rosettes and buckles.

"Attention!" a flustered sergeant called.

"What is the meaning of this?" Captain Lamont's voice lashed out at them.

No one answered. Every man stood rigid.

Close to the fire was a powder keg that had rolled there when the man who had been sitting upon it had sprung to his feet. Stan Powell stretched out a foot and rolled it on into the flame. It would take a moment for the blaze to eat through the wood. Not long, though. None of the Southerners noticed the keg buried in a heap of live embers, for an angry officer held their attention.

A row of worried cavalrymen was screening the three prisoners. Powell saw his companions staring at the fire with bulging eyes.

"Get behind the log!" he whispered. "Quick!"

The alert eyes of the captain saw them as they moved. His voice rang out like a bugle.

"Have you released those pris—"

EVEN Stan Powell was not prepared for the blast that drowned the officer's voice. The detonation of exploding powder drew the air from his lungs. The log behind which the Northerners crouched shuddered convulsively. A blinding flood of light gushed up and outward. It roared through the pine boughs and smeared the hills with crimson. Then the fire came down in a shower of sparks.

Stan Powell leaped to his feet. By the light of scattered brands he saw the twisted bodies of several Confederate soldiers. More men had been hurled into the nearby bushes. Those still able to walk were staggering to and fro. The mounts of the captain's party were milling in a hopeless tangle, their reins trampled beneath their feet, their bridles caught on the saddles.

"Come on!" Powell shouted to his friends. "Get yourselves horses!"

As he made the dash, Powell tripped over a body. By the light of a sputtering pine cone beside it he saw that the man was Lamont. He wished he knew how badly the officer was hurt but time was the very essence of life to him now. He had only time to arm himself with the captain's pistol and to run on.

Shots were fired at him. He dropped one man with the revolver. Shotwell used a clubbed rifle to down a second, and Drung all but crushed a third with his bare hands. Oaths, groans, dust, powder-smoke, squealing horses and squalling lead blended in a mad orchestration of conflict. Powell saw Shotwell swing himself to the back of a horse, then Drung was mounted. All three were in the saddle now and with spurs raking quivering flanks they were away, with bullets clipping the branches about them.

For hours they rode on at breakneck speed until at last, sure that pursuit was far behind, Stan Powell called a halt, to give the winded horses a breather.

"The best thing to do now," he said to his two weary companions, "is to go on as we planned, pretending we are traders. Yellow Jack's place should not be far from here. I have a fair idea of its location, from having been there with my father. We'll head for there, and see what we can learn."

Shotwell and Drung, wearied, dirty, glad to be free from the Confederates, were of no mind to argue. After a short pause to clean up and get some needed rest, the three fleeing Northerners went to pick up their packhorses.

Early the next day they came in

sight of the Indian village.

Yellow Jack's encampment! The sights and smells of the Indian village whirled Stan back through the years. The snarling dogs, the round-faced children, the big-eyed papooses staring soberly from the backs of waddling squaws—all were familiar. So, too, were the groups of braves that moved between bands of captured ponies and piles of stolen blankets.

Shasta sub-chiefs, Siskiyou warriors, Modoc raiders and Klamath renegades all were there. They threw black, threatening looks at the whites, when they rode up. Only an attitude of utter confidence could help them through. Eagerly Powell's eyes sought for some familiar face, but failed to find one.

THE squaws retreated and the braves pressed closer until the trail was completely blocked. A scarred warrior, with blue-jay feathers in his hair, addressed the arrivals.

"Why paleface come?"

Stan pointed to the half dozen pack-horses, laden with trading goods.

"Me friend of Yellow Jack," he said.

The warrior's scowl deepened. "Paleface lie. Yellow Jack hate white man. Paleface all time promise to help red men. Help no come. White men shoot Indian braves. Steal squaws."

"Take us to see Yellow Jack," Powell said firmly, "and we'll find whose tongue speaks straight."

"Yellow Jack, him no see," growled the warrior. "Paleface leave quick!"

He lifted his gun threateningly. A ring of suspicious savages gathered about him, pressing closer.

"Stan," muttered Shotwell, "my hankerin' for seein' this bunch of Indians is plumb satisfied. Let's git, while there's still hair on our heads."

"Don't try retreating," Powell warned sharply. "They'll shoot us sure, if you do! Quick, Drung! Open that pack on the sorrel!"

While the corporal worked Stan called:

"I have come as a friend. With me I bring gifts. If I do not talk with Yellow Jack and the other chiefs, great suffering will strike the red man."

"Who come see Jack?" called a deep, guttural bass.

The crowding warriors parted, making way for a short, powerfully built Indian with oily locks rubbing the copper of his shoulders. Naked from the waist up, he wore a pair of wrinkled green trousers, into the belt of which was thrust a tomahawk and a pistol. Eyes like live coals glinted across the swarthy rolls of fat that ridged his cheeks.

"Who want see Jack?" he repeated.

Powell gravely lifted a hand in salutation.

"Has Yellow Jack already forgotten Trade Maker?"

The chief stared. "You no Trade Maker. Him old. Him die."

"Me his son, Whistle Blower," said Powell. "Cannot Yellow Jack remember the time Whistle Blower won the horse race here?"

The chief stepped closer. After a long look he gave a surprised grunt.

"Now Jack know. Boy him grow big. Why you come?"

"To trade like my father. See? Ponies have bright cloth. Knives—beads—"

"You say you have something to tell?"

"That's right."

"You come my tepee. Big chief all there. Him listen. Maybe believe. Maybe think lie. My braves keep pack-horse safe."

Powell pointed at Drung.

"He stay with ponies, too. All time watch. Other man stay with me."

"Good."

Pivoting, Yellow Jack stalked toward the biggest tepee in the meadow. It stood on a small knoll and from

the top of this could be caught glimpses of the lava beds, gray, wrinkled and sinister, as they stretched in jagged isolation far to the northwest.

"Great place for these murderous devils to hide, ain't it?" muttered Shotwell. "Once a bunch o' raiders got back in them rocks, nothin' couldn't smoke 'em out."

THE room into which Yellow Jack led them was a large one. Opposite the entrance was stretched a half circle of silent, expressionless warriors. It was a much more representative group than Stan Powell had

ever seen. In addition to the representatives of tribes that he had already noted were chiefs from territory farther east—Bannocks, Western Shoshones, Pah Utes, and Washoes.

More disturbing was the presence of two wolf-thin Apaches. Already Indian agents of Buckner and Cushman's riffraff band were here. In the dark wildness of the eyes of the Apaches as they looked at Powell were gleams of ugly triumph.

Seating himself on a deerskin, Yellow Jack motioned Powell to do likewise. Without speaking, Powell selected knives, cheap watches, burning glasses, and hatchets from the pack which Shotwell had carried in. He indicated the chief for which each gift was intended.

To Yellow Jack he handed a pair of polished, silver-mounted pistols. The chief could not conceal his delight. Only the two Apaches were missed.

"Has Whistle Blower nothing for our red brothers from the South?" Yellow Jack inquired.

Powell shook his head.

"I give nothing to them. They are true friends to no one."

"How can Whistle Blower understand the minds of warriors who have not spoken?" demanded Yellow Jack.

"I know that white robbers sent them here to feed you lies," the white man said. "They want you to help them kill and rob the paleface miners of their gold. They tell you the gold will buy many horses. That is a lie. It will make the white warriors come with guns and shoot you. Other years, when red men camped here, they traded ponies, captured squaws, and all the things taken on their raids. Now, instead of trade, it is all talk of war."

"Tonight there will be much blanket, pony, and slave for trade," boasted Yellow Jack. "Soon white man from the South fight white man from North. Then Indians drive all paleface from red man's hunting grounds."

So that was it. Distinct as a steel etching, Powell could see what was going on in the Indian's mind. Agents of men like Burr, Cushman, and Buckner, in order to drive the Indians into lawlessness, had told the tribes that they need no longer fear the whites, for the whites were fighting one another.

They had hoped by this means to disrupt all authority through the mining areas, so that the theft and smuggling of raw gold would be made comparatively easy. A few thousand troops scattered throughout the whole Pacific Slope would be completely helpless to cope with the brutal massacres which would arise in scores of places at once.

But Yellow Jack and the chiefs of other tribes fancied they saw an opportunity for the red man to regain his power. They envisioned the whites so weakened by warring among themselves that it would be easy for the Indians to kill them all and take back the land.

The fantastic scheme could never succeed, but attempting it would bring no end of misery. Along the valleys of the Columbia, the Willamette, the Rogue, the Deschutes, the Klamath, the Sacramento and other rivers, there would be gutted homes and murdered settlers.

The presence of Western Shoshones and Pah Utes proved that the carnage was expected to reach across the dry valleys of Nevada into the sun-smitten vastnesses of Arizona. Settlers on the Humboldt would die. The Truckee River and the Carson would carry blood mixed with the brackish water of their sinks. Here was the making of a brew more devilish than anything that Major Curwood or the Northwest Military Department had dreamed.

THIS horror must be stopped. But how? The very fact that Yellow Jack had spoken so plainly showed that he had no intention of letting the three whites carry back the news of what was being plotted. Haughtily triumphant, the Indian chief fingered the tomahawk at his belt.

"Now let Whistle Blower speak his mind," he demanded.

"Not with enemies who have tried to kill me listening to my words," Stan replied gravely. "I have a message for Yellow Jack that may make him the greatest of war chiefs, but the wisdom which I bring is for his ears alone."

Would the Modoc chief give him the private audience requested, or had negotiations with the Apaches and other warlike tribes already gone too far? If such were the case, Yellow Jack might rely upon torture to produce any information that the whites concealed. The chief's expression was thunder-black yet, he made an imperious gesture.

"Yellow Jack will speak with Whistle Blower alone," he said.

With noiseless dignity the group departed, until only Stan Powell and the chief were left to face each other across the smoking fire.

"Now Whistle Blower, speak," said Yellow Jack fiercely.

"For many summers my father traded with your people and the Indians of other tribes," Powell began slowly. "Always his words were honest. And I, too, may wish to trade with Yellow Jack for many snows to come. What I say now comes straight from the heart. The white outlaws, who sent the lying Apaches into your camp, will in time be hunted down by the soldiers of the great chief in Washington, and they'll be killed. It is useless to fight the white warriors. They are too many."

"But now the palefaces fight each other," Yellow Jack persisted.

"That is far off from here. The soldiers here will never go to that war. They will stay to hunt down Indians who steal and kill. If Yellow Jack's people steal and scalp, they will be driven into the mountains. When winter comes there will be no food. Your bellies will shrivel from lack of meat. Your squaws and papooses will die of hunger. But stay true to the White Father and he will help feed you. I, Whistle Blower, promise to bring you many fat beefs. Now I have spoken."

The chief was silent a long while. At last he stood up and lifted his arm.

"Yellow Jack believes Whistle Blower has spoken with a straight tongue, like that of Trade Maker, his father. Let Whistle Blower stay with my people for three sunrises and trade. Then Yellow Jack will know which trail to lead his warriors."

CHAPTER XI

White Slave

EXCITEMENT was running high. A white squaw was to be offered for sale in Yellow Jack's encampment. One beautiful and young, who would bring the price of many ponies.

A thrill of pity ran through Stan Powell as the Shasta sub-chief, who was in possession of the prize, described the fine points of his offering. He would not sell for any price, he declared, except that he was in debt among his people.

Two Indian youths threw fresh fat fuel on the campfire and squaws entered a tepee, to emerge a moment later, dragging a white girl between them. At first she held back with all her strength then, seeing there was no way of avoiding the ordeal, she lifted her head and walked, unaided, into the circle of savage traders.

From where Powell stood, he could catch only side glimpses of the captive, but the little he did see sent a wave of apprehensive horror over him. Could it be possible that he was seeing aright? He shoved nearer and, as the fire leaped higher, his fears were confirmed. The slim, distraught girl who looked shudderingly around the ring of prospective buyers was Annis Garner!

Her gaze swept over him but he knew that she did not see him. Terror had numbed her faculties.

The Shasta sub-chief seized her golden hair in his dirty hand and held it up so the others could behold its beauty. Never had so fine a slave been offered, he boasted. Her face was one at which one would never tire of looking. She was well-built, strong, healthy. She could carry water, cook her master's food, and do all to make him happy. And her voice was like the song of a bird at dawn, or the music of running water.

He ordered Annis to sing. When she showed no sign of responding, he twisted her wrist.

It was all that Powell could do to keep from charging the Indian, but if he did he would lose all hope and chance of helping Annis.

She moaned at the torturing pain.

"Sing!" the Shasta commanded again.

A few faltering notes floated upon the smoke-scented air. The haunting sweetness, like a prayer, ate into Powell's heart as nothing had ever done before. He had never once thought of Annis being in the hands of the Indians.

"See?" exulted the captor. "Have I not spoken straight? How many ponies am I offered?"

At first there was spirited bidding on the part of several braves, but when the number of ponies went up to over a dozen, the bidding dropped off. No squaw could possibly be worth such wealth.

When the scar-faced Shoshone with the blue-jay feathers, bid twenty ponies, no one raised him. The Shoshone's oily features glittered with triumph and he started toward the girl.

"Twenty-five ponies!" Stan Powell's voice sounded strange in his own ears.

Annis Garner and every Indian in the crowd stared at him.

The Shoshone scowled. "Where," he sneered, "are the ponies of the paleface?"

"In my packs are the price of many horses. And, if I promise more, I can get them. All the Modocs know that the promise of Whistle Blower, son of Trade Maker, is good. Is this not true, Yellow Jack?"

"The words of Trade Maker's son have always been straight," assented the Indian.

THE Shoshone chief conferred with braves from his own band and announced that he would give thirty ponies.

"Thirty-five," Powell said promptly.

There was another parley before the Shoshone made a bid of forty.

This time Powell hesitated before raising the bid.

"Has Whistle Blower no more ponies?" taunted the Shoshone.

"Enough to buy several squaws," Powell answered, "but there are many slaves to be bought for less than forty ponies. Still I will offer forty-one."

Across Annis Garner's face flashed a look of hope. The chief who had been bidding against Stan Powell, seemed undecided and kept conferring with his braves.

"Does my Shoshone brother say more?" asked the Shasta chief.

The Shoshone folded his arms. "No squaw is worth more than forty ponies. Let the paleface have her."

It cost Powell supreme effort to pretend indifference as he claimed his prize. His voice was rough as he said, "Come," and grabbed her by the wrist. He turned and spoke to the Shasta.

"Tomorrow Yellow Jack will pass judgment on the worth of my trade goods. Out of them will be purchased the forty-one ponies, unless the Shasta chief wishes goods instead."

"That is good," said the Shasta.

"Come," said Powell again, and roughly pulled Annis away.

Silently, with the girl stumbling beside him, Stan Powell made his way to the wigwam that Yellow Jack had insisted he must have as an honored guest. He could feel her trembling in the darkness and he wondered how much of the feeling was relief. Surely she should be glad that even he had come to take her away from the Indians. Nothing could seem as horrible as being lost forever to her own race.

He held up the flap and stood aside for Annis to enter, remembering too late that, if he were to treat her as the Indians treated their squaws, he should go in first. His saddle lay on the dirt floor and one of her toes hit against the heavy wooden stirrup.

Worn with weariness and dread this was all it took to throw her off her balance and she swayed toward him. He caught her in his arms and held her for a moment. The mingled anger and bitterness because of her treatment of him in Caligon, the relief of knowing that she was safe made him as confused as she was unstrung. It was a terrible emotional strain to be so concerned about the safety of one toward whom he felt so bitter.

After a moment he carried her toward a pile of skins that he had been using for a bed. She tried to speak, then suddenly put her head on the robes and burst into violent sobbing.

He sat on the ground beside her, making no comment. No matter how wrong she had been in her treatment of him, she had undoubtedly suffered torments at the thought of being a slave among the Indians. She would need the relief that weeping would bring before she could talk sensibly again.

He knew she would not have cried in the presence of the Indians. Her pride would have kept her calm outwardly, no matter how great her inward suffering. But now she could give vent to her misery.

"NO USE crying any more, Annis," Powell finally said, a little roughly. "You'll be free as soon as we can get back among our own people, if we ever do. I don't believe in slavery, though I know you do."

"I don't believe in white people being held as slaves!" she flared.

"Well, that is neither here nor

there," he said dryly. "What you need now is sleep. We can talk matters over in the morning."

"Sleep? I'll never sleep again!" Then she added, womanlike: "My clothing is torn and dirty. My hair is in a snarl and my combs are all gone. We have ridden miles and miles and miles—"

"There are combs among my packs. And other toilet articles. When it is light, you can make yourself more comfortable. How long have you been in the hands of the Indians?"

"Only a few days this time. I was captured by them once before, farther north, and held for a few weeks. But then I was treated as a guest and

allowed to live in the same tepee with an Indian princess."

"How came you to be up in Oregon?" Powell asked.

"I was going to Portland on business," she said, shortly.

"You didn't happen to have business with a man named Burr, did you?"

"What do you know about Mr. Burr?" Annis asked quickly.

"Some interesting things. They would be, particularly to the Federal authorities, if they get hold of him. No doubt your errand was dangerous—especially since it had to be done so secretly that even your own Confederate soldiers did not know your whereabouts."

"What do you mean?" Annis demanded sharply.

"I happened to run into some of them and they were searching for you."

"But I—I sent—" She stopped suddenly.

"The word evidently did not go through," he said dryly. "Now your visit with Northerners is likely to be considerably prolonged. In the light of what you have just told me—"

"You mean that you would use what I told you under such a strain as this as evidence against me before your—your brutal Yankee officers?"

"I doubt if our Yankee officers are particularly cruel," Powell said coldly. "Certainly no more so than the exigencies of war make them. So far we have not found it necessary to hire Apache scouts!"

He could feel her anger through the darkness of the tepee. It showed in her quick, jerky breaths.

"Perhaps not," she came back at him spiritedly. "But I never heard of a Confederate officer setting a whole tribe of Indians on the trail of a lone woman, just because he happened to have a personal quarrel with her."

Stan Powell drew a sharp breath.

"Who do you mean set the Indians on your trail?"

"You did. At least, Albert Buckner said so. He and some of his men took me away from the Indians up north. He was taking me back to be with my—with friends down at Caligon. Then a troop of Federal soldiers from Fort Sierra swooped down on us. Mr. Buckner kept telling me you were a friend of the Indians and would not hesitate to set them on my trail. I didn't believe him. I thought I knew you better. But when the Indians followed on their ponies and dragged me away, I could only believe he was right."

Powell laughed harshly.

"His protection doesn't seem to have been all it should," sneered Stan. "He must have seen them coming and ducked. I'm not particular what you believe about me, considering what I already know of you and the nefarious business you have been willing to carry on for the Confederate Government. But just to put you right—I never set the Indians on you, or any other woman. Buckner is one of the world's outstanding liars and you were a little fool to believe him.

"Now get to bed and to sleep, if you can. Later I may come in and lie down at the other side of the wigwam. Though I am a guest of Yellow Jack's and have been well treated, I am being watched. We must conduct ourselves as the Indians expect us to do. While we are here you will act as my slave, working for me as the squaws do for the braves."

"But I don't know how to do a thing!" Annis protested.

"You can learn," snapped Powell. "Surely you are as intelligent as the slaves imported from Africa!"

"If I could see you," Annis said, from between tight lips, "I would scratch your eyes out!"

"I'm willing to own you'd try," he said, with a short, hard laugh. "That's about the kind of gratitude I would expect."

He could tell from the sound that she had thrown herself on the pile of skins again and was crying—bitter, furious sobs. Now that the weeping was aimed at him he was singularly unperturbed by it. Perhaps, because he knew that she was safe, he was willing for her to endure some present punishment, as long as he could regulate the measure himself.

"No use to cry," he said, as he rose to leave. "I'm going outside, and there will be no one to impress. If you need me for anything call, and I'll come."

CHAPTER XII

Conflict

YELLOW JACK had demanded that Stan Powell wait in camp for three days, and they had lengthened into a week — a week made more difficult because the Apaches continued to sow discord. It took many hours of trading and more of patient explaining to recreate good feeling.

As Annis began to feel a measure of security in her new surroundings, something of the horror connected with her capture departed. She began taunting Powell with having become a slave holder, and at the same time used all her charms to both irritate and ensnare him.

A real flare-up came when he caught her talking with one of the Apaches. That meant she was attempting to send a message—probably to Lamont. That was like her daring. Usually Stan Powell admired her spirit, but now it irritated him to find that she would risk so much to serve a cause for which he had no sympathy.

Cowed by the white man's burst of anger, the Apache slipped away, his face so inscrutable that Powell could guess nothing of how much had already been planned in that secret meeting. And Annis' smile was almost as enigmatic. He had given her freedom and, as he saw it, she had taken advantage of his laxness.

In this mood he took some garments from one of his packs, the sort most prized by Indian women. Rolling them into a bundle, he strode into the tent and threw them down beside Annis.

"From now on," he said sternly,

"you will dress like a squaw and do a squaw's work. The experience should be good for you!"

She laughed mockingly and he saw that she did not believe him.

"I'll have some food brought over and you are to clean up this tent and cook my dinner before I get back," he said. "Sprinkle the floor to lay the dust."

"You don't mean that, Stan," she said, unbelievingly. "You know I would have a difficult time cooking with a stove. Over a campfire it would be impossible. And I would not know where to get water."

"I'll get a squaw to show you how to manage."

"And if I refuse?"

"Do you want me to sell you again?"

Both knew the threat was an idle one and that if she actually rebelled he would have to find some other means of enforcing his commands, now that he had started the issue. For the time being it seemed wisest to leave and allow her time to mull the matter over. He had thought of several possibilities about enforcing discipline before he returned, confident that a struggle would follow.

To his great amazement the work had been done. A fire had been built in the open space in front of the tent. Over the clear coals venison was frying and in another skillet were corn cakes.

Powell stopped in surprised admiration. The tent flap was lifted and Annis came out. Powell had often thought the garb and headdress of the Indian maidens attractive. Now he was amazed to find how becoming it was to Annis, with her fair skin.

She had also braided her hair.

Nothing could have made those golden ringlets of hers below the bands of bright beads look in the least like the straight black braids of the squaws, but the Indian braids gave Annis an added charm. Somehow she had managed to get enough water and privacy for a bath and to wash her hair. Miraculously she had achieved the daintiness he had always associated with her, even though clad in the style of the Indian girls.

HER attempt to simulate the demure deference that the Indian maiden bestowed upon the young brave was not too great a success, but Powell knew what she was trying to do, and also knew that this pose would be more difficult to cope with than rebellion.

Explaining that she did not know the Indian term for the masculine ruler of the tepee, she began calling him, "My lord." It was a most irritating form of address, spoken with mocking sweetness, yet he could think of no way of stopping her now that he had ordered her to act like a young squaw.

There was no crushing that spirit of hers! No wonder she had been valuable to the Southern cause. No wonder Captain Lamont was tempted to try any means in order to locate her.

Only the memory of the treatment Powell had received from her in Caligon kept him from declaring his love once more. But he refused to make a fool of himself a second time. So he remained silent most of the time, sullen and difficult to approach. But Annis never relaxed her efforts to please him, and continued her humble services.

It was when he discovered her down at the creek with the other squaws, washing his clothing, that his determination to make her act like an Indian woman broke. Wading out into the stream he gathered the clothing up into his arms and ordered her back to the tent with him. Meekly she followed him out of the water.

When he waited along the trail for her, she held back.

"It is not customary for slaves or squaws to walk with their masters,"

she told him demurely. "You go ahead and I shall follow. I have not yet learned to waddle, but in time I shall do it well."

Embarrased and furious he stalked through the village, the water from the wet bundle in his arms trickling down into the dust. Annis shuffled several paces to the rear, every line of her body, every movement expressing abject deference to his wishes. It was done for the sole purpose of annoying him, and he knew it. Yet he also realized that she was giving a superb performance.

Sight of Drung and Shotwell watching, wide grins on their faces, added to his annoyance. Throwing the clothing on the grass, he went inside the tent. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that Annis was waving merrily to his two companions and that they understood what she was doing to him. But she followed him meekly into the wigwam and stood looking modestly down at her feet.

Now he noted that she had discarded her moccasins while washing, as the other women had done. Stones had bruised her bare toes and one was bleeding. Her hands looked red and rough from rubbing the clothes across the rocks.

SCARCELY realizing what he was doing, he dropped the tent flap and strode toward her. Catching her in his arms he kissed her fiercely.

"I had to do that," he said hoarsely. "It was either kiss you or beat you, and I have a natural prejudice against physical violence toward people smaller than myself. But I can stand only so much bedevilment." She made no objection to the caresses, looking up at him placidly.

"Annis," he said, his voice shaky, "I swore to myself that I would never try to explain anything to you again. But you know why I bought you from the Shasta and why I have treated you as I have. I can no more tear the love of you out of my heart than you can entirely forget me. I know you betrayed me, yet—"

"Betrayed you?" Her eyes opened wide. "When did I betray you? Even when I was told that you had put men on my trail and were hunting me down on a charge of conspiracy against the Union, I did nothing against you! I don't believe it now, of course. Both Mr. Drung and Mr. Shotwell have told me how you were shot by Mr Buckner and, while I thought you were trying to make trouble for me, you were lying in an army hospital—at the point of death! Oh, Stan, how could we so have misunderstood each other?"

He pressed her to him again.

"It's this devilish war," he growled. "War always does that to people. It makes them suspicious of one another. But from now on I shall never let you out of my sight until you have taken a solemn oath of allegiance to the Government."

"I couldn't do that, Stan," she said seriously. "There are my people and my friends to remember. No matter what I think of you, I have promised—"

His arms loosened their hold. For the moment he had forgotten Captain Lamont. She had never talked of him, yet he felt sure there was a definite understanding between them. Perhaps it was a union strongly urged by her family.

The blood that had pounded through his veins slackened so abruptly that it left him sickened. He wondered if he could ever feel throbbing joy again. He must get out into the air and decide whether it was worthwhile trying to fight against all the forces that were trying to come between them. If Annis truly loved him, any difficulty could be surmounted. But, if she did not—

He had turned to walk slowly toward the entrance when the flap was almost torn from the tepee as Yellow Jack plunged, panting, into the cham-

ber. He was naked to the waist. His chest and cheeks were streaked with vermillion war paint. With his tomahawk he pointed southward.

"Enemies of Whistle Blower and Yellow Jack come! Many red warriors. Much white man. Shoshones, Pah Utes—not like Modoc make peace with Whistle Blower. Come—fight! You help Modocs."

Green pastures shining in the late spring sun. Sleek ponies scudding across the springy turf. Gun barrels glittering. Squaws tearing down the lodges. Indian papooses climbing upon mares too old to be combat mounts.

Some brave had met his death, for the wailing of a young squaw cut through the hot, bright air. Far out on the flats, the Modoc cavalry already was engaging the enemy. Circling close, then darting outward like low-flying bees, they were contesting every foot of the way.

COMING toward the tepee were Drung and Shotwell. They had his horse saddled. Yellow Jack had vaulted to the back of his pony and now was speaking.

"Whistle Blower's squaw go with others. Lava beds—"

Powell understood. Yellow Jack knew his braves could not fight the combined forces of his enemies to a standstill, and there had been no time to prepare any form of strategy. Taken partially by surprise, all he could hope to do was delay the advance until his squaws got their household goods and families safe into the rocky labyrinths of the lava fields.

Powell turned to Annis. "You understand?"

"Yes. But—"

"Never mind. Stay with the squaws until I come back! Do as I say!"

His enemies were her friends. Still this was the only safe course. That

Bill Cardigan Barges Into Battle When Pancho Villa's Rebels Raid on Both Sides of the Rio

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FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

accounted for the sternness in his voice. Then he was gone.

The same wind that bent the feathers in Yellow Jack's war bonnet flapped the brim of Stan Powell's hat. On his right, Drung was checking up on shot, caps, and powder charges. Shotwell, riding as though glued to his saddle, was examining his pistols. The saddle carbine beneath his knee was partially pulled from its scabbard.

They left the meadows and entered a tract of baked earth, scattered cactus and scraggly sage. Bullets began humming about them. The eddying columns of Yellow Jack's Modocs were striking like angry hornets, then streaming away. The air was filled with their chanting, and the dust churned upward in a wavering, saffron curtain. Through it came the flash of guns and the yells of the charging Indians. Horses were going down, and here and there a brave. This was war!

Joining the long line of warriors that curved toward the attacking renegades, Powell and his companions emptied their guns in true Indian fashion. As they whirled away, a spear-head of fast-moving horsemen intercepted their line. There was a melee of pistols, sabres, and clubbed guns.

A roan horse drove its shoulder against Powell's mount, nearly knocking the gelding from under him. Over a tossing mane he saw the fierce visage of Galigon's former sheriff. Rolfe leveled a cavalry pistol.

As red bloomed from its muzzle, Powell threw himself flat in the saddle. The ball cut through his shirt and slashed the skin on his shoulder. Before Rolfe could fire again Powell jabbed him in the mouth with the muzzle of his gun. An arrow struck the roan in the rump. As it jumped the ex-sheriff toppled, blood gushing from his lips.

The tangle of fighting men had suddenly broken. Powell was riding again, caught in the main party of Modocs, now retreating. The sound of firing grew fainter behind them. A mile farther away Yellow Jack was organizing his braves for another stand.

Three times this maneuver was repeated. After the third time Yellow Jack swung alongside Stan Powell and pointed toward the lava beds. All but a few of the Indian women had vanished in the gray labyrinth, taking their household goods with them.

"Squaw him safe," pronounced the chief. "Modoc brave go lava. No fight till get more powder."

A MOMENT later Drung and Shotwell joined them, the latter dexterously bandaging a slashed arm as he rode.

"Fer a game that promised excitement both continuous and hot, this here session petered out plumb sudden," complained Shotwell.

"Didn't that clip on yore forearm satisfy yore hankerin' for action?" asked Drung.

"It might have, providin' I'd got Buckner. One of them Apaches used his hatchet on me just as I was drawin' a bead on the derned slave-owner. Hey, what kind of grass is yuh're carryin' round in yore fist?"

The corporal grinned and opened his hand. In the palm was a lock of crinkly, black hair which he dangled gaily before Shotwell's eyes.

"That," he announced, "is better than half of Cushman's beard. I took it out by the roots. Next time we meet, I aim to harvest the rest."

"What yuh shoulda done was twist his head off and brung it all along," growled Shotwell. "Then yuh coulda finished pickin' it odd times and had yoreself a hair rope."

"Did yuh ever try calm, collected plannin' with a whole mess of Shoshones on yore neck?" asked Drung. "Mebbe you can, but it shore rattles me."

CHAPTER XIII

A Long Trail

ONCE the fire of conflict was gone, the Modocs became a sobered, saddened band. Ten dead and wounded warriors were being carried by their retreating comrades. In addition to these, Powell knew of several whose bodies had not been recovered.

Entering the lava beds, where a tongue of gradually narrowing grass land drove a deep wedge of green into the slag, the braves followed the same route that had been taken by their fleeing squaws. Abandoned baskets, tepee poles, sacks of dried berries, bags of jerked meat, and a few scattered blankets told of the speed of their flight.

With his features drawn into lines of bitterness, Yellow Jack called Stan Powell's attention to what had taken place.

"If white man fight red man, squaw and papoose run or be killed. When paleface fight paleface, all same. Indian women hurt."

This was the truth. Powell knew there was no entirely satisfactory answer, so he wisely attempted to make none.

When the ribbon of grass had narrowed to rods, Yellow Jack began giving orders to his men. In ones and twos the braves dropped from their horses and melted into the rocks. If the enemy followed, they would be met with an annihilating fire from the hidden Modocs.

A little later the chief halted his party.

"Horse go no farther," he announced. "Leave 'em here."

A few larger Indian boys appeared from among the rocks and took over the care of the horses. The Indians who had been killed in battle were left in a row beneath the shade of a stunted cedar.

"Pretty soon squaws come and fix for bury," explained the chief. "Now we walk."

It was a tortuous trail over which the Modocs carried their wounded. In and out among the jagged blocks of stone that looked as though they had been scattered by some colossal maniac. Not a sound came from the sufferers in the blanket stretchers as they were hauled over knife-edged walls and around narrow corners, but the eyes of several were black wells of pain. Blood, oozing from their wounds, stained the path.

After an hour of travel they came out in a tiny basin where enough dirt had collected for a few trees to grow, and a little grass. In this pocket of not over two acres, Yellow Jack's people were gathered.

With a fortitude born of desperation, they had already begun the work of reestablishing their village. Tepees had been erected. Some squaws were cooking over fires of dry grass and twigs. A meager spring, seeping from beneath the lava, had been cleaned and an old squaw was carefully ladling out water in a horn dipper.

All gathered about the returning warriors. When Yellow Jack recited the names of the dead, the basin was filled with wailing. Dramatically the chief held out his arm and spoke. Powell had learned the Modoc language in his childhood and could understand most of what was said.

"Peace, my people. Your cries will not bring the dead warriors back to the council fire, nor to the tepees of their squaws. All that is left for us is revenge. We will bury our dead, care for our wounded, and find a safe place for our children, wives and old people. After that Yellow Jack and

his braves will take to the war-path again. For every slain Modoc we will kill ten of the white bad men and the Apaches.

"Those men are enemies of the great war chief whose council lodge stands to the far east, beside the rising sun. The great war chief at Washington has many fighters. His warriors will drive all our enemies south again. Yellow Jack and his braves will help. They will have revenge and also will find favor with the Great Chief so that he will give the Modocs back their fishing streams and their hunting grounds. When the war is over, the Modocs will once more be strong and happy."

STAN POWELL wondered if Yellow Jack were promising more than it was in the power of either white or red agencies to fulfill. He feared it was, yet he could not help but see how the spirits of the Modocs responded to hope. They crowded closer, their black eyes flashing, as they drank in their leader's words. Yellow Jack was restoring faith in themselves and in their destiny—the faith by which all men live.

But while he listened Powell's eyes were roving the crowd in search of Annis. She was not in sight. Did that mean that she had been hurt, and was resting in some wickiup?

An old black crone, her locks whitened by many winters, crouched by a fire, poking at the sticks which fed it, and paying not the least attention to what was going on. Powell walked over to her.

"Where young white squaw?" he asked.

The old crone lifted a saddle-leather face, opened a toothless mouth and mumbled something, then turned back to the fire. Powell turned toward a slim Indian girl, the one with whom Annis had talked most in the other village. He could detect a pity in her dark eyes as she reached inside her dress and pulled out a folded paper.

"Where white squaw?" he asked her.

The girl shook her black braids. "Not know. Gone. She say this give you."

His hand trembled a little as he took the sheet. Like a man under sentence he unfolded it and read:

Dear Stan:

I am scrawling this while the squaws tear down the camp. Stan, I must leave you and find my way back to the Southern army. My duty lies in working for the Confederacy and this may be my best chance to get back. If you were here I might not have the courage to try it. Thank you so much for saving me. These days here have been happy in many ways.

Please do not feel bitter toward me about this. Try to forgive me and remember that I, too, have things to overlook. You were the one who caused the explosion that wounded the person who meant more to me, in the years before I met you, than any other man in the world. You have no reason to be jealous of him and some day I'll explain it all if ever I have a chance. If it had not been for the war, I would have been content to be your slave for life.

With deep regret,

ANNIS.

The paper crumpled in his fingers. His distress was equally divided between concern for Annis's safety and his own loneliness and disappointment. Even while she had pretended such submission, she must have been arranging with the Confederate soldiers, through the Apache scouts, for a way to return to them. As he gave the matter a thought, he could see that no doubt she knew that this attack was to take place and had planned a place to meet her friends.

Blankly he looked about. The withered crone at the fire, the young Indian girl with the pitying eyes, the wide-eyed Modoc children, and the crowd gathered about Yellow Jack, had all become infinitely remote. He felt utterly alone—lonesome to the core of his being, and sick at heart without her.

For a time he thought of starting out to search for Annis, then realized how impossible it would be to find her. She had left before the squaws had started across the lava. Most likely she had procured a horse, with the help of an Apache. For all he knew, the Confederate camp might have been comparatively close to the Indian village. In any case search was useless.

Yellow Jack was showing knowledge of human nature when he urged his people to action. Only through fierce striving could such losses be even partially numbed. Stan Powell, too, must undertake something that would call on his entire strength. Thank Heaven, there was still much useful work to be done. The Union needed him.

The Confederate cavalry, under Lamont, and aided by the California Secessionists, were still successfully plotting for the delivery of Northern gold to the Confederacy. The danger that the Union's solidarity would be undermined on the Coast still existed. It was imperative that the North obtain much, much more information about the plans of the South and of the Indians.

What Yellow Jack could give, and had given, was only a beginning. He would need to travel far—among the Shastas, Klamaths, and the Siskiyous to get this. He must even strike south along the east side of the Sierras, for the Western Shoshones around Warner Lake were probably in on the plot. Even the Pah Utes from Pyramid Lake, Truckee Meadows, and the Carson River Valley were doubtless ready to take up arms again in retaliation for their defeat the past summer.

Somewhere among these desert tribes, with the aid of Yellow Jack, he must discover the Confederate plans and solve a way of halting the shipments of gold.

And that effort would be spurred on continually by the thought that the man who had successfully planned the Confederate side of it, was the man who was taking Annis Garner's affection away from him.

The next morning after helping Yellow Jack bury the Modoc dead, and joining in the solemn ceremonies, Stanley Powell set out on his journey, with Luke Shotwell. It was arranged for Corporal Drung to head in another direction.

It was a long, hard trail the two men followed, and sixty days had passed before they at last reached Virginia City, the West's great bonanza camp.

Powell felt both weary and exhilarated. In those sixty days since he had left the lava beds in Northern California he had become tired of traveling, yet he felt instinctively that the converging point of the double trail of intrigue which he had followed was close.

En route he had learned of Burr's death in Oregon but that would not put a stop to the plans which Burr had set in motion. Buckner, Rolfe and Cushman had continued the campaign of inciting the Indians to outrages and collecting the stolen gold. Lamont, according to secret advices, had been unable to obtain all the gold he wanted west of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and planned to start dickering with the Southern sympathizers in Virginia City. That would be the time for Buckner and his partners to approach the Confederates.

ORE teams, water wagons, cow ponies, buggies and stage coaches jammed the rutted streets, spilling over on the plank sidewalks. In front of the stores were adventurers of every nationality and character. Gun men rubbed shoulders with ministers. Swindlers, politicians, miners, stockmen and merchants mixed in a new, raw blend of life.

"Stan," Luke Shotwell said, "I shore wish we'd got Yaller Jack and

Drung to come to Virginia City, 'stead of headin' 'em back fer Fort Sierra."

"Somebody had to take the reports back, Luke," Powell reminded.

"Shore, but them two'd have been mighty proud to help me soak up the surplus likker in these parts. Just the same, I'm aimin' to pile off this cayuse and hoist a few mugs pronto. The Bucket o' Blood Saloon yonder has a right moist and homelike look. Reckon I'll start there."

"See that you keep sober," warned Powell as he started to walk down the street.

Powell had just purchased a newspaper and was reading how Beauregard and Johnson had beaten the Union forces under McDowell at Bull Run when he all but knocked over a girl. He started to apologize, then choked with astonishment. The startled, lovely face looking up into his belonged to Annis Garner. His heart leapt up.

"Annis!" he cried. "How did you get here?"

"Hush!" she whispered, quickly adding, "Don't stand there like this! Keep walking."

"But why?"

"Don't ask me now, Stan. You are in terrible danger. Go to your hotel at once. Then, after dark, come to see me."

"But where?" he persisted. "What's the hurry?"

"Don't waste time questioning me now," she pleaded. "Please do just as I say. Just ask someone for the Hillman residence. Anyone can tell you how to find it. But don't mention that we've met, and please keep under cover."

"You can't leave me like this!" he protested. "It doesn't make sense."

"But it will later. Good-by, dear. I'll be waiting for you."

With a quick motion she wrested herself free and was gone, leaving him nothing but the memory of a tender smile.

CHAPTER XIV

Rendezvous

DARKNESS did not keep the Hillman house from looking small and shabby. Light showed only from one front window, which was heavily curtained. Why, thought Powell, as he knocked, had Annis chosen such a spot for their meeting?

A bolt rattled and the door opened, framing Annis in its yellow rectangle. Anxiously she looked into the darkness.

"Annis," said Powell, "it is I."

A quick catching of breath told her relief.

"Hurry," she urged. "Someone may be watching."

Swiftly he stepped inside, noting with satisfaction that there was no one else in the small living room.

"Alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

Hungrily they looked at each other. He noted that she was thinner than when he had seen her last and her face, still beautiful, looked troubled. With a tired smile she said, a little uncertainly:

"I am thinking of turning traitor. To warn a man like you at all is a form of treason to the South. You are doing more against the Confederacy than any man in the Northwest. And yet—" Her whisper died against his coat.

"There is nothing to warn me against that I don't already know," he assured her.

"Oh, yes, but there is, Stan, darling. I think I must be insane tonight. I'm even ready to make a bargain."

"What is it?"

"Give up helping the North and go either to Canada or Mexico. I'll go with you! That way it wouldn't be so wrong for either of us. Each side would lose a supporter. Please, Stan, say you'll do this! If you will, I promise that no slave ever purchased by any man could give more faithful devotion than I."

"Look at me!" he commanded.

Slowly she lifted her eyes.

"Annis would you want the man you love to go back on his oath? Could you ever really respect him if he did?"

"I . . . Oh, Stan, anything is better than having you killed! Try to understand! Captain Lamont is my half brother. Because we have been orphans since childhood, we have grown unusually close to one another. He has warned me against caring for you. He says that now you are as good as dead."

"Do I look as though I were to you now?" Powell asked, forcing himself to laugh.

"Don't joke, Stan," Annis begged. "It's too terribly serious. Buckner, Rolfe, and Cushman, and some others who hated you in Caligon are now here in Virginia City. They expected you to come here. They are secretly offering a reward for your life. Here, as in the other gold camps, there are hundreds of men who think no more of committing murder than they do of eating or drinking. Stan you must leave! For my sake, if for no other reason."

His arms tightened reassuringly about her. That she was on the verge of a breakdown he could plainly see. What was his duty in this case?

In a way, the greatest kindness he could do her was to arrest her. If the matter were properly put up to Major Curwood he fancied that while undoubtedly she would be held as a prisoner, she would be treated with every consideration. What she had told him would justify the Northern military authorities in being extremely liberal.

BUT he knew certain things about Annis which made this plan seem far from feasible. She was the type of girl whose affection would be turned to hatred by such an act. It might even destroy her health.

Her fingers stole up and touched his hair.

"Please, Stan, say you'll go," she pleaded. "I'll never, never ask anything like this of you again."

There was more of pleading, more of mutual suffering. In the end, when he said that he must leave, both were spent and heartsick. On the threshold he paused, striving to bring some hope into the parting.

"Tomorrow we'll talk it over again," he promised.

"Another day will not change our minds, or make parting any easier, darling," she said sadly.

Still, to make parting possible at all, he held the thought in his mind.

The door closed, leaving him in a blackness that matched the darkness of his thoughts. Hesitatingly he took a few steps from the house. It came to him, as he did, that Annis Garner had no intention of seeing him tomorrow—or any other time. She would not have been so despairing if she had not felt that this was a last good-by. Now he knew that he could not let her go. He must talk again with her.

He had turned to step again on the porch when behind him came a swift rush of feet. He tried to defend himself, but another man was leaping toward him from the left. Before he could down the first assailant, the second had landed upon his back, driving him to earth. Something heavy crashed against his skull, and all thought ended. . . .

Gropingly Stanley Powell reached out his hand. Where could he be, and how had he arrived where he was? The floor upon which he lay felt oily.

The room seemed large. Someone seemed to be talking.

He would have moments of semi-consciousness, then all would be dark stillness again. Finally he could see enough to know that he was in a place that formerly had been used to house the hoisting machinery for a mine tipple. Part of the superstructure above the shaft was visible through a torn-out end of the wall. Most of the machinery had been removed but coils of broken cable, lengths of pipe and miscellaneous articles of iron still cluttered the place.

The light came from two candles, stuck into the necks of bottles. These were placed on a work-bench along the east wall. By their light, as consciousness fully returned, Powell could see three men gathered about the bench, conversing in low voices. Then he recognized the trio— Cushman, Rolfe, Buckner. Cushman's arm was in a sling of dirty flour-sacking.

"Gentlemen," Buckner was saying, "it is to ouah advantage that Mistah Powell wasn't killed on the street. If he had been, theah would have been no ascertaining how much the Yanks have learned. Now we can question Mistah Powell."

A short, snarling laugh came from Cushman.

"Lot of good that'll do. Whether or not we like him, Powell's got plenty nerve. Yuh'll get no more from him than yuh would from an Injun. What do you say, Rolfe?"

"My sentiments, exactly," snapped the ex-sheriff. "Tryin' to pump Powell'll be a waste of time."

"He may prove difficult," purred Buckner, "but with a major's commission for a reward if I succeed, and promotion for all of us, it's worth trying. Let's have a look at him."

PICKING up one of the candles, Buckner stepped over to Powell and held the light above his head. Drops of hot tallow fell upon his face, making him wince. Buckner smiled genially at the pain inflicted, and tipped the candle further.

"So you've come round, Yank! I thought that thick skull wouldn't crack. Heah, get on youah feet and march oveh to that bench."

Buckner slashed the rope which bound Powell's ankles and gave him a kick in the ribs. Sharp pain stabbed through his side. Probably the kick had broken a rib or two. Dizzy with agony, he staggered to a standing position, then reeled toward the bench. The movement increased the friction of the bindings upon his wrists. A trickle running down over hs hands informed him that they were chafed until they were bleeding.

Still smiling, Buckner placed the candle back on the bench and began toying with his revolver.

"Mistah Powell," he observed, "theah is great interest among us Southernehs as to what yo'-all have learned through youah snoopin' the last while. Supposin' you satisfy ouah curiosity by tellin' us how you found out we were in Virginia City."

"You'll have to make your own guesses about that," Powell said huskily.

Anger made heat lightning in Buckner's eyes. The click, as he thumbed his weapon to full cock, was plainly audible in the stillness. For an instant Powell thought that he was to be shot. Then, with an effort, Buckner gained some of his aplomb.

"I've been promisin' myself foh some time, Yank, that I'd soonah or lateh have the pleasure of killin' you like a dog. But my duty to the South may interfere with my doin' that for the time being. Now tell us how come you were with Miss Garneh at that house,"

There was no mistaking the suspicion in Buckner's tones. The man had loved Annis, but likely the knowledge that he could never win her had changed his love to a form of hatred.

"Did she arrange that meeting, Yank, or did you?"

Cushman's black beard shoved closer as he listened for the answer. So did Rolfe's thin, vinegary countenance. Stan Powell knew that if they were convinced Annis had in any way worked against them, they would destroy her with the same treachery and cruelty that they were preparing to use upon him.

"Yuh're keepin' us waitin', Yank," reminded Buckner, and Powell knew he would have to say something or his silence would be interpreted against her.

"I went to Hillman's on business and ran into her," he said.

"Mighty interestin'," drawled Buckner, "only theah ain't a word of truth in it."

"Of course there ain't," sneered Cushman. "The business was gettin' tips from her. She's likely tipped him off to everything, includin' Bitter Wells. We're liable to have a whole swarm of officers bargin' in down there—mebbe some troops. Most of all, we've got to keep Lamont from knowin' all the details of how we've got this gold, which means that this hombre and the girl can't work together. Lamont is one of them lilies that would find it hard to take gold, even for his beloved South, if he didn't think it was come by accordin' to Sunday School rules."

"We'll not have any trouble about that," said Buckner softly. "Powell, heah, is going to tell us everything about his conversation with Miss Gahneh, includin' the name of anyone who knows anything about ouah business. Just what do yo'-all know about ouah plans, Mistah Powell? And who is in the know besides yo-self?"

POWELL remained silent. Buckner flicked a glance toward the packer, whose body partly concealed some tool against which he leaned.

"Cushman," Buckner said, "I reckon yo'-all had betteh get ready to squeeze some sense into this stiff-necked fool."

"Shore," agreed Cushman. "After havin' the cuss drill me, there's nothin' I'd enjoy more'n seein' him squirm."

Cushman's long right arm seized a wooden handle, which he twirled rapidly. The jaws of a large vise slowly opened, revealing the iron ridges that covered their inner surfaces. Horror flowed through Powell. Was it possible they intended to torture him?

An action of Buckner's destroyed all doubt. Ramming the muzzle of his revolver against Powell's mouth, he snapped:

"Open up, befoah I blow youah teeth out!"

Better let him shoot. That would be the easiest way out. Nothing would deter these three from murdering him. Stanley Powell's lips set tight.

CHAPTER XV

In a Vise

ROLFE made a quick movement and one of his heavy-soled boots struck square on Stan Powell's shin. Involuntarily his jaws tightened at the excruciating wave of pain. Metal scraped along his clenched teeth. Two men wrestled with him, while Buckner pried his jaws apart.

Cursing, Buckner grabbed a piece of rag and rammed it into Powell's mouth. Forcibly, and roughly, they dragged him toward the vise. With all the power of his muscular frame he fought, pulling back from the vise.

"I'll take the scrap out of yuh!" snarled Cushman.

The side of his palm struck the back of Powell's neck with paralyzing force—a jackrabbit punch. He went limp and power of resistance left him. Weakly he allowed himself to be jerked against the vise.

"What we goin' to do?" asked Rolfe. "Stick in the head, or a foot?"

"Neither," said Buckner. "We want his skull intact for talkin' and his feet for walkin'. Untie his wrists and we'll shove in an arm."

Powell could not struggle as his left forearm was placed between the jaws. Cushman seized the handle and started to screw up the vise. The apathy of their victim puzzled the trio.

"I wondeh," said Buckner, "if that rap on the neck could have knocked him cuckoo, so he can't undehstand anything?"

"He can feel," growled Cushman. "Wait till them teeth get a good holt. He'll—"

One of Powell's feet, driven violently into the pit of Cushman's stomach cut short his threats. It threw the packer to the floor in a heap. In almost the same swift movement Powell grabbed Buckner's revolver with his left hand, and with the right seized a heavy wrench from the workbench and hurled it at Rolfe with all his strength.

Gunfire licked past the flying missile, but the wrench served its purpose. Before the ex-sheriff could shoot again, Powell had whirled Buckner about so that his body would catch any second bullet.

The advantage of surprise had been with Stan Powell. But now Cushman was recovering and in another pulse beat Rolfe would start flanking. A blindingly swift follow-up was all that could save Powell.

Using every ounce of reserve power, he lifted Buckner from his feet and sent the man's body flying toward the ex-sheriff. Pivoting, he bolted for the open.

A pistol spanged. He heard the ball whistle harmlessly into the blackness. Three more steps and he would be enveloped in darkness then—

His toe caught upon a bent bolt and hurled him headlong. In falling he reeled sideward and brought up with a breath-robbing thud on the very edge of the shaft. He was getting to his feet when Rolfe struck him. They grappled, locked in a tight embrace, swaying at the edge of the hole.

Groggy from his fall, Powell was forced to step backward. His foot went down and down. He was falling into the shaft, pulling the yelling sheriff with him.

THOUGH it was less than twenty feet, it seemed they must have fallen a mile before they crashed upon some sort of covering that had been placed across the hole. Rolfe was underneath at the moment of impact and his body cushioned Powell's fall. Through the shocked confusion in his mind, he could hear Buckner shouting above him.

"Bring a light, Cushman! They both went down the hole."

Feeling his body slipping, Powell groped frantically through the darkness and caught hold of a spike that projected from a timber. He pulled himself over against the wall of the shaft and plastered his body tight between two of the beams that framed the shaft.

Hardly had he made his cover when yellow waverings of light moved down the shaft. They struck upon Rolfe's inert form, where it was hanging from a foot-wide plank, his legs dropping down one side, his arms trailing over the other. A nail that had caught in his clothing seemed to be all that held him from sliding off.

A convulsive shudder ran through Rolfe's body. His legs moved. A ripping sound came from the cloth caught on the nail. He slipped slowly

at first, then abruptly he was gone. From below came the ever diminishing sounds of a body bumping against the sides of the shaft. The noise died to a whispering, then ceased.

Cushman's bass boomed down the shaft, hoarse with excitement. "Sufferin' scalp locks! That was Rolfe! He was hammered plumb to jelly before he hit the bottom."

"Too bad," said Buckner. "But he took Powell with him."

"What we goin' to do now?" asked Cushman's jittery voice.

"Do? Nothing, of course. Nobody knows they were heah but us. The mine's not bein' worked. It's liable to be yeahs befoah theih bodies are found."

The light vanished. The sounds of voices died out. Yet for minutes afterward Stan Powell remained motionless, listening to the drip of water somewhere far below. He must be certain that no one remained at the mouth of the shaft before he attempted to climb out.

And, while he waited, he steeled himself for the ordeal of making the ascent in the pitchy darkness. Every inch would be a hazard, with nothing but groping hands and feet to feel out spikes and boards that would hold his weight. One rusted nail or rotten plank, and he would drop down beside Rolfe.

Yet he dared not delay. Annis was in mortal danger. Morning might be too late to save her from Cushman and Buckner. Before daylight he must be sure that she was safe.

After that, he and Shotwell would investigate the mystery of Bitter Wells, of which he had heard his captors talking.

It took superhuman effort and cold nerve to make that climb out of the shaft, but with the thoughts of Annis' peril goading him, Stanley Powell made it. But had he known what he discovered as soon as he set out to find Annis, he believed he would never have come from that mine shaft alive.

For Annis had disappeared! Hours of search failed to turn up any trace of her.

MORE heart-broken than he had ever been in his life, but still with the duty to his country urging him on, Stan Powell and Luke Shotwell, on their rested horses, set out on the long, wild trail to Bitter Wells.

It was night again when they finally reached the spot, but Powell recognized the vicinity instantly from the detailed descriptions he had gathered in Virginia City. Reining his tired horse to a halt, Stan Powell sat his saddle, looking over his weirdly strange surroundings.

So this was Bitter Wells! By the bright moonlight Powell could study the Basin almost as well as though the sun were shining. Below the rim along which he and Shotwell had ridden lay an oval valley, perhaps five miles wide by twice that long. Snaking out of dry hills on the north was a small stream that cut its way across the wide expanses of snowy alkali before dumping its bitter waters into the chain of tule-bordered swamps at the valley's center.

To the left was a great outcropping of red sandstone, extending from the valley floor nearly to the summit of the nearer hills. Erosion had cut a steep canyon down through the sandstone and, where it opened into the valley, was the massed gloom of many trees.

Bitter Wells was the only spot in a vast territory where both water and good pasturage could be obtained. Consequently it had become a bone of contention between rival stockmen. Bodies of murdered men had been lost in the saline ponds. The bones of others bleached in the canyon.

Of law there was none. The spot was too remote and unimportant for the lax justice of frontier towns to reach it, so the place had become a

recognized rendezvous for desperadoes. Dogs barking told that there were people there now. So did the tinkling of horse bells and the bawling of a restless cow.

"Yuh know," Shotwell burst out, "I ain't got a bit of hankerin' to go down in there. Let's go back and look for Annis Garner instead."

Mention of Annis struck Stan like a cold wind. He had done all he could to find her himself before leaving Virginia City, and had instructed the authorities to look for her, but worry had gripped him every mile of the ride South.

"Whatcha say, Stan?" urged Shotwell. "Hadn't we better reconnoiter a bit longer before tacklin' goin' down?"

Powell shook his head. "It's tonight or never," he said. "Our canteens are empty, and we can't get anything to drink if we wait."

Strips of blanket wrapped around their horses' hoofs smothered the sounds as they started down the canyon. Two-thirds of the way down they encountered a pool of still, sweet water, held in a natural cistern of rock. Quenching their own thirst, they carried hatfuls to the horses, who could not reach the pool.

Not far below the pool was a tangle of mountain birch and alder, filling a deep gully. Leaving their horses in this cover, they started out on foot. In a short time they hit thickets of thorny brush that glistened silver in the moonlight.

"Bullberries," whispered Shotwell. "I shore used to tie into the jam that Ma made when I was a button. But never take to a patch of the tarnation things when yuh're bein' chased. They'll claw yore pants off, then start on yore hide."

DOWN in the mouth of the canyon a dog howled, then another and another.

"Must be Indians camped here with all them curs," opined Shotwell. "Yep, I'm shore of it now. Here's a steer they killed. Nobody but a redskin takes insides and all."

They crossed a pole fence. A ditch ran parallel to it, and beyond was the fragrance of newly watered grass. Grazing horses moved leisurely in the moonlight. On their right the cliff loomed bold and vertical, its base buttressed by the piled-up gloom of trees. Through the foliage came one thin line of light.

The canine bedlam grew louder. Grass swished, and Powell's eyes picked up the low, projectilelike form of a speeding hound. With a snarl it leaped at him. He kicked, knocking the brute flat. With a snap of teeth it was up again, slashing at Shotwell, clamping jaws on his boot. Man and hound went down in a kicking heap. When Shotwell rose he was swinging the canine by its hind legs.

Stalking to a tree, he whirled the beast about his shoulders, then crashed its skull again the trunk. Over by the light a man's voice shouted. Common sense demanded a retreat. As they walked swiftly away, Shotwell stopped short.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely. "Goin' behind thet bush!"

Stan stared but could see nothing.

"Yuh didn't look quick enough," Shotwell snorted. "Looked mighty like a man to me."

"Probably a horse," said Powell. "You don't want to start imagining things."

Shotwell grunted, but said no more until they were crossing a little swale. Here he squatted down and started running his hand over the damp ground.

"If I recollect, we come through right here," he muttered. "Yep, there's our tracks, leadin' t'other way. Stan, I'm goin' to strike a light. 'T'won't show no distance in this holler."

The match burst into flame for only a second, just a few inches above the

ground. By its glow Powell could see where their boot-heels had gouged deep into the wet soil—but Shotwell was pointing at the flat imprint of a moccasin.

"Yuh reckon the hoss I seen was wearin' this, Stan?" he asked with exaggerated politeness.

"But if there's an Apache on our trail, why didn't he give an alarm?" said Powell, puzzled, and Shotwell shrugged.

"Don't ask me to tell what makes an Injun do the way he does," he said. "Least of all, an Apache. Nobody, not even another Injun can guess that. Mebbe he's gone now to do it. This blamed thing makes me uneasy, I tell yuh. Let's get out of here pronto."

"You can if you like, Luke, but there's some things I've got to find out," Powell said, determinedly.

"But yuh can't walk up to that place without gittin' nabbed. Ain't we just proved that?"

"From the front, yes. But there has to be some other way of getting in."

"How? Say, what yuh drivin' at?"

"The land in front of that ledge, on the valley side," Powell said, "is thirty or forty feet higher than it is here in the mouth of the canyon' yet it is well watered."

"Couldn't a spring do that?"

"It would have to be a big one, and the natural watershed is down this canyon. Luke, I'm going to follow that ditch we saw by the pole fence."

AT first they were able to proceed along the bank, but soon the brush became so thick they were compelled to wade in the stream, and it was hard to force their way along. Powell was bent over until his head was only a foot or so above the water, when Shotwell gripped him from behind. He stopped short.

Out of the blackness ahead came the slosh of feet in the swift current. But hardly had the sounds registered than they ceased. Powell stood stockstill, hesitating about going on. Yet retreat might, for all he could tell, hold fully as much danger as advancing. So, cocking his revolver, he moved slowly forward.

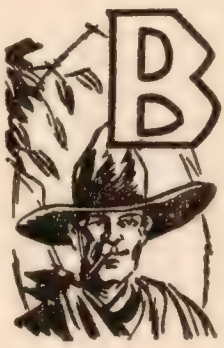
For a few steps the brush was even thicker than before, then they emerged into a small clearing where the moonlight touched the earth and gilded the face of a cliff only yards in front of him. The stream of water ran straight for the bluff and vanished through a hole not over a foot in diameter!

Perplexed, Stan Powell went up to the spot where the water disappeared and ran his hand over the surrounding formation. It was hard and, when hammered upon, gave every evidence of being thick.

One thing looked obvious. No person of any size had passed through that opening!

CHAPTER XVI

Prisoner of War



BAFFLED, Stan Powell faced the brush through which the sound had just come. Was someone watching them? There must be. And the stream which flowed into the hole in the cliff—unless there was some way of getting into the ledge, how had anyone ever discovered that it would come out on the face, which must have been known or that ditch would never have been dug.

"What yuh think of it, Stan?" Shotwell's whispering voice showed his apprehension.

"I can't make sense of it," Powell whispered back. "There must be another, larger opening somewhere near. You stay here while I do a bit of reconnoitering."

"Don't go far. This is the spookiest derned place I ever seen."

Slowly Powell circled the little clearing, seeking some sort of trail. One must exist. Once found, it would give him his solution.

He stepped cautiously into the brush and paused to listen. Small nocturnal creatures rustled through dry leaves underfoot. From the direction of the clearing came a confusion of faint sounds. What were they? If anything had gone wrong, Shotwell would surely have called.

He was about to shove further into the brush when his gaze focused upon a small segment of the moonlit cliff front. Strange, troll-like shadows writhed there. A prickling ran along his spine as he recognized their significance. Luke Shotwell, standing with his back to the cliff, had been surprised! And he was seeing the shadow of the struggle!

Dashing through the willows, Powell lunged into the open and found the clearing bare. But close to the cliff, and only a few feet from the ditch, a haze of dust was rising. It must have been churned by the struggle that he had seen shadowed on the face of the cliff. But where was Shotwell?

A glitter between two rocks attracted his attention. Stooping, he picked up Shotwell's revolver. He straightened and looked about in bewilderment. With the attack taking place here, it would have been a physical impossibility for anyone to have carried his companion into the brush before he had reached the clearing.

Again his fingers explored the shadow-broken cliff front—and found nothing.

He dared not shout nor shoot. That probably would do no good anyhow. Shotwell by now was certainly in no condition to answer, and his attacker would not.

In a sort of panic, Stan Powell turned his back to the cliff and let his gaze run over each inch of the clearing. He must have overlooked something. Instead of using his head he was allowing himself to be stampeded by unreasoning impulses. Now he was going to do some clear thinking!

A chipmunk scampered up on a rock and sat watching his motionless form. With growing confidence it ran to a still closer rock and continued its scrutiny. Then, with a shrill squeak of terror, it was gone in a furry flash. What had scared it? Not Powell, for he had not stirred.

A belated feeling of impending peril made him whirl. Where before had appeared only an unbroken cliff front was now a black, yawning aperture. And from it leaped an Indian. Moonlight glittered on oily limbs and sent ripplings along an upraised knife-blade.

BARELY had Powell's fingers closed about the knife wrist than he and the savage were locked in combat. As they staggered across the clearing, the Apache buried his teeth in Powell's shoulder. Pain aided in shaking him free. But instantly the Indian lowered his head and butted Powell in the stomach.

Bringing up a knee, Powell caught his assailant in the face, turning the man's hate-twisted features upward by the blow. Relinquishing his grip on the knife, he struck with all his strength. His knuckles missed the Indian's jaw but landed on the fellow's windpipe.

The Apache reeled b a c k w a r d. Powell swung again. This time his knuckles smashed squarely against the Indian's chin.

Hardly had the unconscious Indian struck the stones than Powell had him by the hair and was dragging him into the hole. From the darkness came a moan. Shotwell! He was still alive.

Striking a match, Stan Powell saw that he was in a broad chamber off which many other cave rooms opened,

most of them irregular in shape. One main cavern led away into the shadows, and down this ran the stream which had entered the cliff only a few yards from the opening through which the Apache had attacked him.

Now Powell saw that the slab of sandstone had been fitted with hinges, to form a door which swung inward. Quickly he shut it, then turned to Shotwell, who was struggling to a sitting position.

Eagerly Shotwell gulped the water Powell brought him from the ditch, then gasped:

"If yuh ain't killed that danged Apache already, yuh better do it mighty quick. That's the cuss whose brother I shot back in California."

Powell quickly gagged and bound the Indian.

Shotwell was recovering fast.

"Yuh know," he said, "this hombre aimed to take us two alive and private-like, so him and the other Apaches could have the fun of torturin' us without bein' stopped by any of the whites. I don't reckon Cushman nor Buckner would do anything to stop him, but mebbe there's some Rebel officers about and this buck wanted to play it safe."

Powell clapped a hand over Shotwell's mouth, and quickly dragged him over into the shadows of a far wall.

"S-s-h!" he cautioned.

Voices were coming from somewhere ahead—voices that m i n g l e d with the sound of running water and took on the hollow eeriness of the cave down which they walked. As the speakers came through the twisting tunnel toward the main cave room light spilled from a side room.

Now Powell could hear a man's voice plainly. It was Buckner's, and each syllable the man spoke told that he was well satisfied with himself.

"A nice little fortress, don't you think, Annis? Quarters for men, horses and no end of supplies right heah in the cliff."

Stan Powell caught his breath. Annis Garner in this hole! The last place anyone would ever have looked for her.

Irregularities in the passageway made it possible for Powell and Shotwell to overhear, without being seen. By craning their necks they could catch glimpses of Buckner moving about the inner cave chamber.

"WELL, my deah?" he asked suavely.

"Albert Buckner," Annis' v o i c e came sharply, "quit being so hypocritical! You are responsible for my being brought to this wretched place. Why did you do it? What right—"

"Theah now, deah, calm down. No use getting youahself in a fury. Afteh all, theah's no pleasure foh me in being compelled by duty to take such a bewitchin' creature as youahself into custody."

"Duty! *You* talking of duty? All the interest you have in the Confederacy is the chance of making a profit. You want to turn over stolen gold to my brother in return for some other type of remuneration."

"Quite so. But when one works for a Cause, one's loyalty is likely to grow, especially if adequate rewards are in sight. I'm certain the Confederate Government will consider that I am doing the South a service worthy of recognition."

"Quit talking in riddles!" demanded Annis. "Remember—you are not addressing a Northern spy."

"I'm not so sure of that, my deah. It's since he got so thick with you that Stanley Powell won his commission. I wondeh, now—did the Yankee pig win his lieutenancy by turning oveh to Major Curwood information that you supplied?"

A gasp came from the girl. "Albert, have you lost your mind completely?"

"Hardly." Buckner's voice remained suave, but there was no mistaking the underlying grimness in his

tones. "Didn't you masquerade as the Yank's squaw for several days when you were up by the Northern California lava beds? Didn't you follow him to Virginia City?"

"I? You *are* mad! My brother sent me to Virginia City to help create sympathy for our Cause. I did uncover men who are proving themselves extremely helpful. I was there two weeks before Lieutenant Powell arrived."

"The main point, howeveh," persisted Buckner, "is that things have gone increasingly bad foh ouah plans eveh since you met the Yank. And the first thing you did when he reached town was to arrange a meeting at the Hillman house. I suppose you told him everything about ouah arrangements."

"That is not so! Not one word of it!"

"Well, no matteh. We have you safe with us, and the Yank will neveh repeat anything he got from you."

"Albert, what . . . Did you—is—"

"Something happened to him, Annis, if that is what you mean. But I neveh hurt him. He tried to run from me in the dark and had the misfortune to fall and break his neck. His own cowardice killed him."

"You have overtold that story, Albert," Annis said tightly. "I might believe some things, but never that Stan Powell ran from you. He was brave, in a way that you do not understand at all. And I shall not believe he is dead simply because you say so!"

"Just the same he's dead," Buckner said doggedly. "As a loyal Southerneh I can't be sorry, though I should have liked the pleasure of killing him personally."

ANNIS GARNER'S voice was filled with horror as it throbbed through the cavern.

"You really do believe he is dead, and you are mean enough to rejoice! Tell me honestly. Why do you think he is dead?"

"Sorry. But I can hardly go into details until youah own position is clarified."

"Albert Buckner, if my brother were here, he'd choke that insult back down your throat!"

"But he isn't and, when he does come, it's a question whetheh oh not you'll be heah to receive him."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. You've got to prove to my satisfaction that you ah loyal to the Confederacy or I will send you back South undeh arrest. You'll stand trial foh treason."

"On a trumped-up charge!" Annis said scornfully. "No man could be so low as this!"

"Consideh me the exception," Buckner said unperturbed. "But rembeh—I said theah was a chance to convince me of youah integrity."

"How?" the girl asked, and Buckner's answer was like an explosive bombshell in that cave as it impacted against the furious Powell's ears.

"By marrying me, Annis," Buckner said softly. "Do that at once and I'll know I was mistaken."

"Nothing under the sun could force me to such an act," defied Annis.

"Perhaps undeh the stars, then. Think it oveh, Annis. And just rembeh. It's a simple choice. Marriage to me at once, or be taken South to stand trial foh treason. I have to meet a man on business now and must go. In the morning I'll come foh my answeh. Good night, my deah. I hope you make a sensible decision."

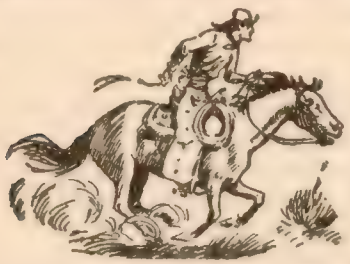
Pressed tight against the wall, Stan Powell, wanting nothing so much as the feel of his hands on the man's throat, watched Buckner stoop to come out of the low entrance to the chamber. He was carrying a tallow candle that cast a yellow glow over his features. Evidently he had wanted to appear at his best, with so much at stake, for he was fastidiously groomed. His flowered vest was spot-

less, his high, winged collar was white and unwilted. His sideburns appeared freshly trimmed. On his face was a look of calculating satisfaction.

The muzzle of Stan's revolver followed him out of sight, then he whispered to Shotwell:

"Luke, keep watch while I speak to Annis for a minute!"

The white sand on the cavern floor deadened the sound of his feet. Annis was unaware of his approach, even after he had entered the room where she sat beside a small table, made from a box. Close by was a home-



made bed, covered with army blankets. On the foot of it were set two cowhide bags that apparently contained such of her possessions as she had been allowed to bring along.

Her hands were folded in her lap and she sat motionless, staring toward a small bust portrait of Jefferson Davis, that hung upon the wall. Never had she looked so small as now, so utterly forlorn and helpless.

"Annis!"

HER eyes sprung wide as she turned. A shudder passed over her, as though she were hearing a voice from the grave. She was trembling, and steadied herself only by holding to the bed. Then horror turned to wonder, and wonder to glad realization. Her dazed eyes, her lips and her reaching hands all held a glorious welcome.

"Stanley! Stan, I couldn't believe—"

Hungrily he pulled her toward him. For this moment nothing mattered but to hold her close.

"Oh, Stan!" she whispered. "It's madness for you to be here! You must get away. Albert *must* have believed you dead or he would not have left me at all. How did you find me?"

Quickly he told her, then his voice grew grim as he said:

"And I heard what he said to you, and those accusations of disloyalty! I am going to get you out of here."

Swiftly he stepped to the main cave and spoke to Shotwell.

"Seen anyone, Luke?"

"Not a soul. Still, yuh better be comin'. This ain't the safest place I've ever been."

"Listen, Luke. You've got to take Miss Garner out with you. Go back the way we came. When you reach the horses, wait for me. If I don't get there in two hours go on without me. Understand?"

"Shore. But I don't like it. Yuh'll get exterminated, shore as Gawd made little apples green. Besides, what would I do with the gal? Chaperonin' lone females ain't the best thing I do."

"I'll try to take her off your hands. But if I don't, consider her a prisoner and take her back to Fort Sierra. See that she is treated kindly and with great respect. Tell Major Curwood how I feel about her. He'll see that she has good care."

"Make a prisoner of war out o' her?" said the surprised Shotwell, and Powell nodded.

"Only a sort of protective custody until the end of hostilities. Anything would be better than to have Cushman and Buckner plotting against her. Why, those skunks are no more true to the South than they are to the Federal government!"

Shotwell shook his head.

"Reckon yuh're right," he muttered. "But I shore don't consider yuh over bright, Stan. If yuh had even a low grade of common sense, yuh'd never let this gal out of yore sight till yuh had her tied."

CHAPTER XVII

Missing Girl

POWELL crouched in the shadows until Annis and Shotwell had disappeared through the door in the cliff wall. He could hear Annis urging to be allowed to talk with him once more and Shotwell insisting that there was no time for dilly-dallying. Stan Powell, he was explaining, had no sense at all about some things, though he was remarkable about others.

Powell smiled a little bitterly as he listened. There was some truth in Shotwell's observations. But Shotwell was right that it would be folly to take up any more time in talk. This cave was as safe as a load of dynamite with a short fuse attached and lighted.

He had been sorely tempted to go with them, but that would mean leaving without a full knowledge of the plans for the gold. No doubt Annis could have told some of this, but he would not force the information from her, and she certainly would not give it willingly. Besides, now that Buckner had turned against her, there must be a great deal that she would not know.

In any case, Stanley Powell was a Union officer on a secret mission. He needed to know every detail about this place, and the plans of the men who were running it. His country was surely worth that risk.

Cautiously he started in the direction that Buckner had taken. Before long he caught the unmistakable smell of horses. Already, then, some saddle animals were being kept in the cave in order that a retreat might be made through the back in case of a frontal attack on the fortress.

An instant later Powell heard men laughing and joking. Slipping into a side gallery he saw a man with a lantern coming toward him, followed by several other men, each of whom carried a small but apparently heavy leather bag.

The lantern bearer proved to be the bewhiskered Cushman. Stopping before an iron door, set in the cave wall, he produced a huge key and slipped it into the ponderous lock. The mechanism turned with a heavy click and Cushman shoved the door open with his shoulder. Powell could get glimpses of a long, narrow chamber with shelves of rough planking against the walls. On these were boxes of ammunition, rifles and revolvers. At the far end, neatly stacked, were thirty or more bags, similar to the ones the men were carrying.

"Pile 'em with the rest, boys," rumbled Cushman. "Every poke of gold we get has got a shore market with the Confederates."

"How soon do yuh think Lamont's cavalry'll be pickin' it up?" one man asked.

"Not for some little spell. Lamont ain't gathered near all the dust he wants yet. I'm bettin' he'll still be short some in spite of all we're holdin' for him. But there's some Southerners around Virginia City and the other camps that'll likely chip in to make up the difference . . . Well, I reckon the cook's got supper ready for you hombres."

Locking the door, Cushman led his party back the way he had come, with Stan Powell trailing in the rear. Shortly the cavern widened into a large chamber, illuminated by several lanterns. The stream that Powell and Shotwell had followed cut directly across the chamber and disappeared through a wall of rock masonry. A tree branch coming in through a window showed that below was the out-of-doors.

Men in range clothing lounged about the place. Some played poker, others talked. A few were curled up in blankets back among the shadows where the cavern roof swept low. Firearms were in evidence everywhere. So was whisky. Altogether Powell estimated there were between thirty and forty men in the room—as hard a looking bunch of renegades as were ever got together.

At the far end of the chamber Buckner, Cushman and a Confederate lieutenant were talking at a small table. The lieutenant had spread a number of papers in front of him.

ANXIOUS to know what sort of conference was taking place, Powell risked stepping into the room. The constant movement of other men, dressed as he was, offered some protection. With his features shaded by his hat, he sauntered as close to the table as he dared.

He sat down, yawned, then stretched out flat, his arm thrown across his face as though preparing to sleep.

"Gentlemen," the lieutenant was saying, "the amount of gold you have on hand will prove gratifying to Captain Lamont. But what other supplies will he find when he arrives?"

"I've got them enumerated foh yuh, suh," said Buckner.

He began reading from a list—five tons of grain for horse feed, eighty pack-saddles, one hundred mounts, a hundred water kegs, ten thousand rounds of ammunition, a score of pack-horses, and any number of steers.

"Very good," complimented the lieutenant. "The only things I would have added is more of food staples, such as flour and sugar. The steers should be strong animals that can be distributed along the line of march in advance."

"And heah are the names of men who sympathize with the Southern cause," observed Buckner, "and can be depended on foh furtheh aid when Captain Lamont's cavalry reaches Nevada."

Stan Powell listened with amazement to the names of men prominent in the various mining camps. He could hope to remember only a few names from the roll but, once the Federal authorities were supplied with these, the others could easily be acquired.

"Excellent," approved the lieutenant. "And now concerning Captain Lamont's sister. Since receiving word that she was going to be in Virginia City, nearly a month back, there has been no news of her. Arrangements called for weekly reports. With a regular stage schedule between Virginia City and Placerville, California, it is strange that dispatches do not get through."

"That is peculiar, suh," Buckner agreed suavely. "Miss Gahneh has been in Virginia City foh oveh a fortnight."

"But she is at Bitter Wells tonight, is she not?"

"Y-e-s. She came in hopes of finding heh brotheh heah."

The lieutenant frowned.

"Why wasn't I informed sooner of her presence?"

"As Miss Gahneh's fiancé, I can explain that, suh. She arrived heah with a raging headache and thoroughly exhausted. Consequently she begged to be left undisturbed."

The lieutenant appeared skeptical. Pulling a gold watch from his pocket, he glanced at the dial.

"Ten-thirty, and I must be out of here early in the morning. Mr. Buckner, it is imperative that I see Miss Garner at once."

Buckner pulled himself up haughtily. "Suh, you do not seem to grasp that I intend to marry Miss Gahneh. Undeh the circumstances, she would expect me to talk foh heh."

"Buckner," clipped the officer, "just

remember that Captain Lamont has complete charge of all Confederate operations in this area. Either take me to Miss Garner at once, or bring her here. This is an order."

BUCKNER'S cheeks were mottled with rage, but he rose from the table and bowed stiffly from the waist.

"Suh, I shall go foh huh."

As he made his exit Powell felt new relief that Annis was out of the cave. A man with such unbridled fury blazing from his eyes as was plain in Buckner's might do anything. But when Buckner returned to report the girl's disappearance, the cavern would be no place for Stan Powell.

Rising as nonchalantly as possible, he edged toward the outer door, then stopped. There was a fire inside the cave not far from the entrance and a man was just throwing some fresh fuel upon the blaze. Powell dared not risk their scrutiny in so bright a light—especially not with a group of soldiers standing in the doorway, for there must be a number of men beside Cushman who had seen him when he was captured north of Fort Sierra. Reluctantly he retreated back into the shadows.

Almost at once Buckner burst into the room, his features working as he strode toward the table.

"Well," demanded the lieutenant, "did she prefer to have me call on her?"

"Suh," stuttered Buckner, "she's gone!"

"Gone? Oh, come now, Mr. Buckner. This is a little thick to swallow. Your fiancée would scarcely leave without telling you."

"But I tell yuh, suh, she's gone!" Buckner shouted. "And she's taken two large bags of personal belongings with heh. Foh some time I've suspicioned—"

"That's enough, Mr. Buckner! You are not the only one who's been doing some suspecting. Sergeant Kline, see that guards are posted. No man must leave this room until we have done some investigating."

"Don't you believe what I say?" demanded Buckner.

"I think there is every reason to believe you are trying to keep me from seeing Miss Garner," the lieutenant said flatly. "Sergeant Kline, take a detail and search every inch of these caves."

Men were stirring everywhere. Soon the Apache scout whom Powell had left gagged and bound would be discovered. When that happened, realization that there had been outside interference would dawn upon the lieutenant. After that every man in the place would be up for scrutiny. He had to get away! It was now or never.

Keeping his face turned away from Cushman and Buckner, he started toward the outer door. The fire near the door was not burning quite so high. He hoped that Buckner's concern about his own predicament would keep him from paying too much attention to anyone else.

He had begun to be hopeful that he was to get out unchallenged when Cushman bellowed:

"Great snakes, there's the Yank we killed! Stop him!"

Puzzled as to who was meant, the guards raised their weapons uncertainly. But the instant he got closer

to them they would know.

"Catch him!" Cushman kept roaring. "Shoot the spy!"

Occupied with so many dangers, Powell did not notice where he stepped. His boot struck a full bucket, tripping him and almost throwing him into the flames. Fire and water! The old association clicked in his brain, forming the pattern for a desperate ruse.

SEIZING the bucket, he hurled the contents into the blaze. An explosive rush of vapor filled the room with stinging steam and bits of ash. His own eyes burned and he knew the guards were having a similar experience.

Through the hissing fog he leaped at them. Behind was a bedlam of voices, but no bullets flew. Everyone in the place was either temporarily blinded, or afraid of hitting comrades. Before the nearest guard realized his danger, the swinging water bucket in Powell's hands crushed down upon his skull.

The second guard threw up his gun and fired at random. The wild shot missed and, before there was a chance for another a bullet from Powell's weapon had knocked him to his knees.

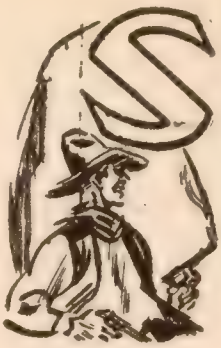
It seemed to Stan Powell that a sheet of gunfire blew him from the door, yet he found himself outside and running, without any particular pain. Curs yapped at his heels. Over in the Indian camp more dogs took up the chorus.

He stepped on a hound and fell. Another brute rushed in and drew blood with snapping fangs, but Powell scrambled up and fairly ran into an unsaddled horse. The animal was still bridled but had caught its feet in the reins and was unable to run.

For seconds that seemed like centuries Powell worked to untangle the horse. Then he pulled himself to its back and streaked away.

CHAPTER XVIII

Water and Green Grass



SUNRISE. Now there was a chance for Powell to look back across the solitude of the desert in search for pursuers. The horse that had given him his chance for life had proved unbelievably good. He had traversed the white alkali flats surrounding Bitter Wells at a smooth, effortless gallop that had gradually widened Powell's lead.

Ascending the dry hills beyond had been harder, for the slopes were steep. To save the horse Powell had attempted climbing the hills on foot, only to find that loss of blood from a shallow bullet slash along his left side had left him weakened. He was compelled to mount once more.

The gelding was badly winded by the time it reached the top. Accordingly Powell had rested until his pursuers were getting close again. The next valley was wider than the other, and again he drew far ahead. A gentler rise favored his ascent of these next hills so he still kept a good lead. Now, on the third ridge line, he could see no one behind him.

Deliberately to avoid leading the Confederates to the trail of Annis and Shotwell, he had struck much farther south. Now, with the heat of another cloudless day before him, shade and a place to rest were of paramount importance.

He anxiously scanned the tinder ranges with field-glasses. Here and there among them were far-spaced springs. With a mounting fever in his blood, he must find one of these, or perish. His head buzzed as his eyes continued the search.

Gulches still rifle-blue with shadow, league-long scarfs of mauve and orange hillside, sun-seared valley floors, and tremendous far-off slopes of pinion pine and cedar. Slowly, painstakingly, he went over them all. He had no strength for futile hunting. He must pick his destination and win or lose on a single gamble.

An amber thread twisting out of the silvery mist to the southwest temped him. Surely there was water there. But it might be saline and unpalatable. And there were fully twenty miles of flat, sterile plain to be crossed before reaching it. That meant hours of riding beneath a blow-torch sun, without tree or bush under which to escape its fury.

On the northwest was an isolated, round-topped eminence, rather low to be called a mountain, yet larger than a hill. The blue-black cast to its upper part meant a covering of drought-parched brush and timber. But halfway up it was one small splotch of fresher green. That should mean water—and water found in such a place would be free from alkali. And chokecherries and elderberries would furnish food for a man too weak and dizzy to kill game.

Water. Cool water. Water that gurgled over tree-shadowed stones. Grass deep and green on which a weary man could rest. Those were the two greatest blessings under heaven. Perhaps Annis and Shotwell would be waiting there for him. Powell caught himself laughing aloud, as though at a good joke. Better think sensibly, if he could.

What if Jeff Davis's soldiers were told about such a spring? They would all desert to get a drink. When he had had all he wanted himself, maybe he would tell them about it and win the war that way. Another paroxysm of mirth doubled him over in the saddle.

His horse jumped and nearly threw him off. A foggy realization of what being left afoot in his present condition could mean jerked Stan Powell back to saner thought. Where was that patch of green? He couldn't see it.

Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he stared again. Yes, there was the round-topped dome looming dead ahead. He would make it. He must, or die.

* * * * *

TO Lieutenant Stanley Powell's saddle-numbed senses, as he rode another trail with Chief Yellow Jack, Luke Shotwell, and Drung the words that had been spoken by Major Curwood at Fort Sierra just a week before seemed to have been said a century ago.

"Lieutenant Powell," the major had said, "the North's hope of stopping the gold smugglers rests now entirely with you."

Was it possible Powell thought, that he had survived blood loss and fever alone on the side of that round-topped Nevada mountain, and had afterward made his way back to Fort Sierra, only to find that Annis Garner, after giving him up for dead, had fled the army post? Could it be that he—Stanley Powell—was already started back for Bitter Wells at the head of such a motley company? Modocs, a few good cavalrymen, and a number of cattlemen, famous for their shooting ability and their endurance?

Vaguely he seemed to remember how the matter of being short of cavalrymen had been discussed. Too many Indian uprisings to spare the needed number.

If he were only sure that Annis had not rejoined her brother and so exposed herself to the dangers of that mad, gallant dash of Lamont's for the South! If he were sure of that he could stand the throbbing pain of his old wound, he could endure the skepticism of those who considered this whole trip a wild goose chase.

Through Nevada City, Donner Pass, Truckee River, Carson Valley, the thought of Annis and the dread of firing upon the force with which she traveled had haunted him, waking and sleeping.

Behind them now were all the gold camps and the ranches. Ahead lay the sterile emptiness of Nevada's desert—that and Bitter Wells where the trail of the Confederates with the gold would be taken up.

"How far yuh figgerin' it is yet, Lieutenant?" Drung asked. He had lately been promoted to sergeant.

"Not over fifteen miles. Beyond that next ridge."

"Almost four o'clock," muttered Shotwell. "Why don't we camp, 'stead of killin' off our mounts? Everybody this side of the mountains is pokin' fun at us for ridin' this-a-way. Didn't Captain Ochletree with the troops from Sacramento say he believed the whole gosh-darned business, goin' after a big bunch of Confederates was a hoax?"

That was true. Ochletree, passing through Carson City, had stated his firm belief that there were not a dozen Confederates east of the Sierras. There was even being circulated a story that the tale of gold at Bitter Wells was all a figment of Powell's imagination, born of his sufferings on that round-topped mountain.

Well, so far the present trip had been tame enough. Not a trace of anything more dangerous than a few Washoe Indians, engaged in gathering pine nuts. If it did turn out that Powell had been duped, the laugh at his expense would echo from Canada to the Mexican Border.

"Look, Whistle Blower! Paleface much hurry."

AN arm, burnt almost black with the sun, stretched east from Chief Yellow Jack's shoulder. Following the Indian's pointing finger, Powell's eyes made out a tiny speck, zigzagging erratically down the mountain slope. As his glance focused upon the distant rider, the man he watched turned and angled away.

"Sergeant, take a detail and bring that fellow in," Powell ordered Drung.

It was fully half an hour before Drung and his men rejoined the column. Riding between two of the cavalrymen was a hatless, wild-eyed army teamster, sitting astride an army mule. The animal, one of an army team, still had on its harness and the flopping traces had worn bloody spots on the animal's legs.

Drung saluted and, jerking his thumb toward the teamster, said:

"He acts a bit teched in the head. Said he thought we was more Indians. Claims the supply train he was with is about wiped out."

"Where is it?" demanded Powell.

The man started to speak, then clutched his throat.

"Water," he choked.

Shotwell passed his canteen to the man, who emptied it without stopping to take breath. Then he talked freely.

He belonged to the supply train attached to Captain Ochletree's command, he said. The captain, hearing that a bunch of Confederates were moving toward Bitter Wells, had rashly left his supply train far behind in his dash to intercept the Rebels.

All had gone well with the train until within sight of Bitter Wells. Then fifty or more Indians and a few whites had suddenly emerged from a draw and had attacked them. The supply train had lost half its draft animals and several men in the first attack. Then they had succeeded in getting several of the wagons into a circle and making a defense.

"That was two days back," the teamster stated. "We lost the wagons that held our water in the first skirmish. Three more of the boys got killed the next day tryin' to get some. My

brother is dyin' with a bullet through his groin. His beggin' for help drove me crazy."

"Where was Ochletree all this time?" asked Stan.

"Down at Bitter Wells, I reckon."

"Then why didn't he send you some help?"

"He did try. We could see the men start out, but the Rebs and Apaches drove 'em back. They're plumb thick down there."

"Think the cuss is cracked, Stan?" Shotwell asked in a low voice.

"Don't know. He's gone through enough to make him crazy. There's something wrong about this business, though."

"What d'ye mean?"

"If Ochletree had two full companies with him, as this man claims, I don't believe Lamont has enough Apaches and Confederates to risk a pitch battle. I'm afraid Lamont has maneuvered Ochletree into splitting his forces and that one detachment of Lamont's men has followed him into the desert. . . ."

SMOKE, black and flesh-tainted, curling over the top of the ridge, was their first glimpse of the horror ahead. A moment later they caught the sound of gunfire and then a series of screams, almost inhuman in their anguish.

Sergeant Drung, slightly ahead, stood up in his stirrups and strained to see what was going on. When he settled back in the saddle his face was drawn and he looked nauseated.

"Look what them devils are doin'!" he gulped.

Stan Powell's straining eyes took in a picture that was to remain a horror with him always. The circled wagons were a mass of t w i s t i n g flames, through which he could see the shriveling bodies and limbs of both horses and men. Not a sound except the hiss and crackle of fire came from that pile.

On a little hillock to one side were ten or a dozen Apaches, so intent upon what they were doing that they had failed to see the column's advance. A hundred yards from the hillock was a jumble of loose boulders. A blue-clad soldier, fleeing from the wagon train, had tried to crawl between two of the largest rocks. He had succeeded in wedging his body into the crevice, but his legs from the knees down protruded. The Apaches were engaged in leisurely shooting off the exposed portions. One leg was already gone and only splinters of bone and sinew remained of the other.

Already Yellow Jack's warriors, at an order given earlier, were executing a flanking movement that had the Apaches nearly encircled. They saw their danger and tried to escape, but were too late. Swift, hard-whipped ponies scudded over the rough terrain. Guns flashed. Panic-stricken, the Apaches rode in frenzied circles, searching for avenues of escape. There were none and, within three or four minutes, the last Apache had been killed.

A swift survey of the alkali flats below informed Powell why they had surprised only a dozen Apaches. Halfway across the valley twenty more of the riders were galloping toward the Wells. Evidently most of the Indians, sure that the wagon train was doomed, had left before Powell's force arrived, perhaps to take part in a final desperate assault upon the Union troops who now were holding the cave.

Over by the mouth of the canyon cattle were moving—many hundreds of them. The presence of so many cattle in the basin could only mean that the renegades with Buckner had, along with other crimes, engaged in rustling on a large scale. Ochletree's command had struck before there was time to move them all out, and now Indians and renegades were in possession of them again. But why were they driving them in the direction of the cavern?

Powell motioned Drung to his side.

"Sergeant, we've got to make these horses go another six miles."

"Good gosh!" groaned Drung. "They're all but dead now."

CHAPTER XIX

The Charge

QUICKLY a freak wind had whipped the alkali into a corrosive fog. Through its gray impalpability Stan Powell could see only the nearest of the men moving toward the cavern. One good had come of the storm. He had been able to split his force unnoticed.

Off to the right Yellow Jack and Drung were leading a column that would slash straight through to the canyon, attempting to shut off retreat in that direction. Powell himself was aiming directly for the cave, where he believed Ochletree's men were making a desperate stand.

Placing a cupped hand to his ear, he listened. Finally he caught a continuous snarl of firing. War-whoops, too, came thinly through the dust and the bawling of cattle.

Spurring close to the trumpeter, Powell ordered the charge sounded. At the bugle notes, the swift, racking trot became a headlong gallop. Through banners of biting alkali, treetops swayed. Red flashes punctured the murk. Riderless horses and fear-crazed steers lunged into the advancing line.

A shift of wind cleared the air. Ahead lay a belt of cottonwoods, with snipers flitting among the tree trunks. Lead and leather, fire and fury!

Horses screamed. Men swore in pain. But the line roared on. It crashed into the timber, sweeping all before it. It crashed through the brush and out in the clear at the foot of a slope leading up to the cave.

At last Stan Powell understood the use that was being made of the cattle. Those besieging the cavern had driven the steers up the slope before them as a screen. A score had been shot down, but each dead animal offered protection for an attacker. The confusion had allowed many of the attacking force to make their way to the stone wall that formed the front of the cavern. At the windows and doors of this wall painted warriors and desperadoes fought hand to hand with the defenders.

Close enough for small arms. Powell's was out, and smoking revolver fire crackled along the entire line. Demoralized by the assault from the rear, those attacking the cave wavered, then fled in utter rout.

One of them was Cushman. Powell roweled his horse toward the black-bearded packer. The fellow emptied his gun at the lieutenant, then jumped behind a crippled cow to avoid Powell's fire.

Cattle, horses, men. They were everywhere. A big roan steer, with a bullet-shattered horn, all but knocked Powell's horse from its feet. Blood spattering from the bleeding stump of horn struck Stan in the eyes. By the time he could see again, Cushman was gone.

A lanky second lieutenant, with bullet-slashed cheek, stepped from the shattered doorway to greet them. His statements confirmed Stan's worst fears. When Ochletree's dragoons had stormed the caverns, they found them stripped of everything useful. All of value that remained in the Basin were the widely scattered cattle.

One Confederate prisoner, a wounded Texan, had explained that Lamont had left only a few hours earlier, taking the gold with him. Ochletree had decided to follow at

once, and had left but twenty men at the Wells to wait for the supply train.

Hardly had the captain and his hundred and fifty men ridden out of sight than renegades and Apaches had started reappearing. The twenty-five soldiers, besieged by five or six times their own number, had been helpless to aid the wagon train.

BLEAKLY Stan Powell considered the situation. This was war—and Lamont had played his hand well. Had it not been for Powell's own arrival, Lamont's Apaches, aided by the renegades, would have destroyed over a fourth of Ochletree's command. Now, out in the desert, Lamont was doubtless setting a trap for the rest of Ochletree's men. Perhaps it had already been sprung. If only the headstrong Union officer had waited until he was joined by the force from Fort Sierra!

"Say, Stan," said Luke Shotwell, stopping beside Powell, "that Texan has just come to his senses agin. I talked with him and happened to mention yore name. Derned if he didn't rear right up on his elbows and demand to see ye."

"What does he want, Luke?"

"Dunno. He's in that room where Buckner had Miss Garner."

The wounded man was stretched on the bed when Powell entered. He motioned with a shaking hand.

"Come closer, Yank, so I can see yore face by this candle."

The man's big eyes were made larger by the sharpness of features worn with suffering. His ragged brown mustache tips curled around lips that were strong, but kindly.

"Yep, Yank, I reckon yuh're shore the gent Miss Gahner set such store by. I was the orderly Cap'n Lamont picked for lookin' after his sisteh. She done talked about yuh a right smart." He stopped for a paroxysm of coughing, then went on in a weaker voice. "Yank, some might think I was a traitor for tellin' yuh this, but I ain't. Cap'n Lamont and his officers is as fine soldiers as ever wore uniform. But them two devils—"

"You mean Cushman and Buckner?" Powell asked quickly.

"Them's the boys." The Texan nodded. "Suh, a wild hog would have more decency than them two. When Cap'n Lamont seen what kind of a gang they had and he heered somethin' of how they got their gold, he mighty nigh tongue-lashed their hides off. He took the gold because he had to have it, and he wouldn't have known how to get it back to them it was took from, nohow. But he told Buckner and Cushman they'd ought to be hung, not rewarded."

"Such talk wouldn't sit very well with them, I suppose?"

"No, suh, it didn't for a fact. And they started right away to let the Cap'n get the gold out of the North, then steal it from him. They've smuggled whisky along to pour down the Indians. Theah ain't anything an Apache won't do for alcohol, suh."

"Are you sure of all this?"

"Pardner, I overheard 'em plannin' it, right here in this cave. That's the reason they shot me. Left me for dead. But I fooled 'em. Buckner is plannin' on gettin' hold of Miss Gahner at Seepin' Springs. That's where —"

The words ended in a groan. Blood gushed from the wounded man's nostrils.

Perspiration oozed from Powell's pores. Surely the Texan would rally and be able to tell him more! Surely Lamont must have been suspicious of Buckner and Cushman! Why hadn't he pulled their fangs when he had a chance?

Powell waited by the bedside, hoping the Southerner would rally. Instead the man's pulse grew fainter and fainter. At last Shotwell bent over him, then straightened.

"Stan," he said, "as I sees it, this

here gent has played his last card in life's uncertain poker game. Nobody is ever goin' to hear him call for another set o' chips this side of Paradise."

SO Buckner was planning to double-cross the Confederacy and take both the gold and Annis by treachery! He must have obtained great influence over the Apaches—so great that Lamont had felt the need of cooperation. Surely there must have been some reason why a man as clever as Lamont had allowed himself to be trapped in such a manner.

But the Texan had said such a trap was planned by Buckner—and truth had been in the dying man's eyes. He had told of the place where Buckner planned to attack, and take the gold—and Annis—and the name of that place was burning in Lieutenant Stanley Powell's brain.

Seeping Springs! Stan Powell had never been to the place but an old prospector had told him about those springs. They were a paradox of the desert. Rising in a jagged defile, cut

in a low, rough range of low, dry hills, they ran when all other springs within a radius of fifty miles were dry.

What had the Texan left untold about the springs? Had he meant to tell that Lamont would lay in wait there to make an attempt to annihilate the rest of his pursuers? But he had said that Buckner meant to take Annis forcibly at Seeping Springs. Perhaps both Lamont and Buckner were planning action—but vastly different action, at or near this watering place.

If the horses had not been worn out, Powell would have started for Seeping Springs that night. But though he burned with impatience, this could not be done. However, he did some more questioning about Ochletree and found out that one of his Apache prisoners had told the captain of the springs and that Ochletree had taken the Indian along as guide. But either the Apache, who had returned in time to take part in today's killing orgy, didn't know the exact location of Seeping Springs, and how far away, or he refused to tell.

All he would say was, "Much long ride."

That coincided with the impression Powell had received from the prospector. It could easily be a distance of fifty or sixty miles. And Ochletree had admittedly started on that trip with little water besides what the men had in their canteens.

Suppose Lamont blocked them from reaching the springs? What if they had allowed themselves to be led into some cul-de-sac, where even retreat was impossible?

Powell thought that he had visualized the worst that could possible happen, but a remark made by the second lieutenant he had rescued proved that there were still further distracting possibilities.

"All the Rebels didn't go toward Seeping Springs. A runner got through shortly after they left reported that Lamont had split his party, and that part of it was headed southwest toward the Sierras. Ochletree had to divide his command so he could follow both of them."

Now the whole desperate pattern of Lamont's strategy was revealed. Just as Powell had figured—the Confederate captain had never had any intention of using all his regular troopers in the dash South. Part of them were being left in the Northwest, part were being used to bewilder and divide the enemy.

If Ochletree and Lamont met in the vicinity of Seeping Springs, the

Northern force would be too weak numerically to cut its way through even at tremendous loss of life. And Lamont, in turn, by depending so largely upon the Apaches who were in Buckner's hands would be that much more vulnerable to attack.

SERGEANT DRUNG came in to report on the success of his own and Yellow Jack's party. They had captured over fifty ponies, all of which were now being held under strong guard. Along with the mounts they had taken some of the Apaches' provisions, including several hundred pounds of jerked meat and bags of dried berries.

More valuable yet were a number of kegs which Lamont had issued for carrying water. While there were only a dozen or so of them, they would still greatly augment the amount of water they could carry in their canteens. And that might mean the difference between arriving at their destination half choked, or fit for fighting.

They would also take the captured horses along, for extra mounts would assure them of transportation and a means to get food. Yellow Jack's Modoc fighters would be of great value to the expedition also. The Indian chief and his followers would mean much more than any corresponding number of regular troops in this particular type of fighting.

Painstakingly Stan Powell went over every detail connected with the advance on the morrow, then he attempted to rest. But it was useless. Over there to the southeast, beyond the burned-out ranges, events might even now be transpiring which could influence the fate of the Nation. Certainly they would decide the happiness of Annis Garner, and in consequence, Stanley Powell's own.

Only one thing was certain in his mind—Seeping Springs had to be taken at any cost!

CHAPTER XX

Surrounded

"JUST six hours of hardjoltin'," Shotwell said mournfully. "Hosses gettin' gaunt as garter snakes. And us only well started! Stan, I read the cards with strict forebodin'. Old Lady Luck's dealin' 'em off the bottom and I'm bettin' we draws nothin' better'n a pair of deuces."

There was reason for Shotwell's pessimism. The Apache trail which they were traveling, instead of sticking to the flat bottoms of the valleys, had consistently hugged the brushy foothills, climbing innumerable ridges and sliding into steep-walled washes.

"What's the use of follerin' every twist, anyhow?" growled Shotwell. "Let's get out in the open and make time. Any minute we get to honin' for this snake track, all we got to do is cut towards the brushiest place in sight and we find it shore. What you say, Yaller Jack?"

"Valley much hot," replied the chief. "No grass. Horse get weak. Up mountain top wind blow. Much cool. Go fast."

Stan Powell looked at the vast upthrust of jagged ridges on the east, and marveled. How could any human make progress along so rough a summit? When he voiced his doubts, the Indian chief smiled.

"Yellow Jack know trail way high. Much old. Indian use long time before white man come. Jack show Whistle Blower."

"But how about the Seeping Springs?"

"Trail go there. Much good. You come."

Before they were half-way to the summit Powell noted the change in temperature and vegetation. Now there was grass, stirrup-deep in some places, so the horses could crop as they traveled. Below, a breathless stillness in the air had intensified the hot sunlight pouring from a cloudless sky. But up here a cool breeze, carrying the tang of quaking asp and pine, acted like a revivifying tonic upon the jaded riders.

On the summit, which showed the splintering from centuries of thunder storms, one smooth thread of worn earth and rock twisted among fields of boulders and around sharp pinnacles. Marmots whistled from the mouths of their burrows, rock rabbits scampered from pile to pile of curing grass as the men rode single-file along the path.

Occasionally they passed piles of stone, evidently built by human hands, but now mere heaps that lacked all semblance of design. Yellow Jack's only comment on these when he was asked about them was a shrug of coppery shoulders, accompanied by a guttural:

"Not know. Much old. One time red man make big medicine."

On either side the mountains fell off sharply, in subdued sweeps of yellow-green and brown, these last finally merging into a vast gray panorama of empty valleys, studded with mirage lakes and flowing with phantom rivers toward an illusory ocean that glistened white on the Southern horizon. Down there were the Panamints, and the canyon-cracked bowl of hills that held the dregs of creation, the bowl men called Death Valley.

Far to the west Powell could see the distance-softened contours of the round mountain where he had fought alone for his life. Somehow he gained courage from the sight. He had won that battle. Nothing was impossible to men of stamina and faith. He must win this one.

As evening approached they reached a great bald knoll, higher than any previously crossed. Around it grew a fringe of pine but, on the naked ridge itself, were only small plants and the charred mounds left from ancient fires.

At the highest point Yellow Jack paused and pointed westward where war-off peaks of the Sierra Nevadas held crimson tapers against the dusk.

"Once Great Spirit stay there," he intoned sadly. "Then he listen to red man pray. Now come no more."

"How far to the Springs?" asked Shotwell.

"Long way. When stars get pale, we there."

Cold, black hours followed—hours when the night wind was like the roaring of distant falls, or the confused murmuring of many voices. Sudden streams of icy air wriggled along cramped limbs and eddied around tired bodies with a numbing chill. Brains grew fagged. Thought largely ceased. Only the click of hoofs, the squeak of saddle leather, and an occasional equine sneeze bound them to reality. Otherwise they moved bodiless, and without feeling.

A faint opalescence had displaced the blue-black of the eastern sky when Yellow Jack stopped again and slid from the pony.

"Whistle Blower come," he said. "Me show. Make no noise."

As Powell stiffly dismounted he was aware that Drung and Shotwell were doing likewise. The four, led by the Modoc chief, moved slowly through wind-twisted cedars and mountain mahogany. The visibility increased rapidly and presently they could see the shadowy slit of a canyon ahead of them. A big cedar, spread out like an umbrella, stood on its very edge.

Dropping to his knees, Yellow Jack crawled under its low branches and motioned the others to follow him. Powell thrust his head over a sharp angle of stone and quickly drew back

as he saw a dizzy drop of several hundred feet.

Detail by detail, a tremendous, sinister picture began building in his brain. The canyon ended not over half a mile to the east, at the foot of a great basalt block. Here a round basin, nearly a quarter of a mile in diameter, had been formed. Within that pocket was grass, and trees in abundance.

Downstream from the basin a promontory of black, volcanic rock closed the canyon to a narrow gap of only a few rods in width. Across this gap had been erected a crude, but effective barrier of tree trunks and boulders.

"Springs up there," said Yellow Jack. "Apache warriors hold water. Union soldiers down here."

His finger stabbed straight below him. For the first time, Stan saw Ochletree's force. A few scrubby cottonwoods were growing near the center of the canyon, which had widened again. Among these trees were the cavalrymen. Some of them had made rough shelters of boughs, but most of them were sleeping in the open, each covered by a single blanket.

Several trenches dug in the gravelly soil evidently served as rifle pits. From the lay of the land Stan imagined it might be necessary for the soldiers to occupy these most of the day, or be exposed to the fire of snipers. A line of fresh mounds at the edge of the trees indicated hard fighting and many casualties.

NOT a standing horse was in sight, but the carcasses of several just below the camp were already swollen to twice their normal size. Disintegration would naturally be rapid in a spot where black, volcanic rock formed the side walls and parts of the floor.

If so many had been killed in the fighting, *there must* be many wounded. Powell looked about for some protection that might be offered to these men, and saw strips of canvas stretched between parallel logs. An arm, thrust between two of these strips waved aimlessly.

Stan's scalp tingled. Even if some sort of depression had been scooped out, the wounded, who lay beneath that makeshift shelter, would be subjected to an inferno of stale, overheated air. No commander would stay in such a place from choice.

Doubtless Ochletree had attempted to carry the breastwork not once, but several times, and had failed. But with Apaches massed on the rocks above, as well as behind the breastwork, it was not hard to understand the cause of his defeat. If unable to take the Springs, the other alternative was retreat, which apparently was impossible, since he seemed to have lost all his horses. All he could do was remain with his wounded, waiting for rescue—or annihilation.

A man rose from where he lay beside a cottonwood and staggered blindly to some dwarf willows, growing in the lowest part of the canyon bed. He clawed handfuls of leaves from the branches and crammed them into his mouth.

"Much thirsty," remarked Yellow Jack. "Too dry. No dew. Sap bitter. Make soldier sick. Soon all soldiers weak. Much sick. Die."

"How long would it take you to lead our men where we can surprise the Apaches?"

"Whistle Blower no catch. Braves from Bitter Wells tell Apache we come. Look!"

Working up a zigzag trail through the chaparral on the far side of the basin was a line of pack-horses. Already the forward animals in the string were disappearing over the top of the ridge. Lashed to the back of each were two of the water kegs.

"Not much Apache stay," said Yellow Jack. "Soldiers no fight now. Some Apache stay. Make sure soldier die. Rest run. Take plenty water."

Disappointment bit at Stan Powell's vitals. He had hoped to force the issue here at Seeping Springs, but again Lamont and the Apaches had anticipated his plans and had fled deeper into the waterless wastes beyond. Somehow he must get hold of prisoners, and find out the further plans of the Confederates.

In all probability the Apaches were looking for the Northerners to take the same trail which they themselves had taken. If so, there was a chance that Yellow Jack could move his Modocs to a position that would shut the remaining Apaches off from retreating up the canyon. In that case, the savages' only way of escape would be past Ochletree's troops.

Knowing how spent those troops were, it was probable the Indians would make a surprise dash and get by with little difficulty. Someone must talk with Ochletree and tell him the situation.

Painstakingly Powell examined the terrain near him. Fifty feet below was the beginning of a rock chimney that extended clear to the canyon floor. A good climber, let down for the first fifty feet, could likely negotiate the rest without great difficulty.

Instantly he made known his determination to make the attempt. Shotwell insisted upon going with him.

Within ten minutes the two men, each carrying half a dozen full canteens, were ready to slip over the cliff top. Already Drung and Yellow Jack were leading the main force in an encircling movement that should bottle up the basin.

DESPAIR can produce a terrible stupor. To Powell it seemed well nigh incredible that he and Shotwell could clamber down the entire crevice and walk part way across the canyon floor before a haggard corporal, his chevrons nearly torn from his uniform, became aware of their approach and opened his mouth in wonder. One of Shotwell's canteens had sprung a slight leak and the corporal's gaze fastened upon the trickle.

"Hallelujah, boys!" he croaked. "Here comes two fellers with water!"

Instantly, from every patch of shade and every trench, men came pouring.

"Good gravy, Stan!" ejaculated Shotwell. "Look at them wounded fellers crawl! They're crazy with thirst."

Shaking, hollow-cheeked men were creeping from under the low-stretched canvas and wriggling forward. From some came delirious, pitiful cries for water. It was a nightmare. And added to it was the oven-hot air of the black-walled canyon, and the reek of carrion. This was an Apache-made inferno.

An officer, with pain-glazed eyes beneath a bandaged forehead, reeled forward, carrying a bloody knife in his hand. Powell introduced himself.

"Captain Ochletree," he said, "I am in command of a column from Fort Sierra. Get your troops in order and we'll ration out this water. There'll be more when my men take over Seeping Springs."

"From Fort Sierra!" exclaimed the captain. "You here so soon? Thank God. And what a march!" He looked down at the knife in his hand. "My surgeon was killed two days ago," he said. "I—I just had to amputate a leg. Awful!"

A bugle on the breeze. Stan Powell stiffened. Even the wounded men looked a little interested, though not knowing its meaning. But to Powell it meant that Yellow Jack and Drung were closing in.

No use in consulting Ochletree at present. The man was moving in a stupor of exhaustion. Stan took command himself, spreading the troops out and warning them what to expect.

Hardly were they set when the first lean, coyotish Indian slid over the breastwork. Another followed and

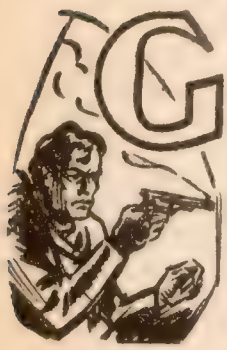
another, until a score of dark forms were in sight. Bent low, they came forward in slinking spurts.

One white man was in the group. Powell could have told him from the rest had there been no difference in clothing. His movements lacked the lithe wildness of those of his companions. Half-way to the cottonwoods the Apaches gathered in a huddle, furtively eyeing the camp. Fierce and untamable they poised for an instant.

Then they charged, howling like wolves!

CHAPTER XXI

The Stand at Canoe Rock



GUN fire crackled across the gorge. Half the attacking Apaches went down. There were more shots and cheering as the dragoons closed in. Clubbed guns and sabers rose and fell.

One prisoner! That was what Stan Powell wanted. If he could save but one from the massacre! He needed someone whom he could question.

Above the mass of whirling fighters he could see the white man, a head taller than his companions. Powell jumped into the melee and fought his way toward the fellow, but just as he reached him, the man, a Confederate, was knocked flat with a swinging gun stock. Powell planted himself astride the man and prevented him from being brained.

When the dust cleared, he saw that the man was a sergeant. Helping the battered Rebel to his feet, he began to question him.

"Whoa, Yank," drawled the Confederate. "Give me time and I'll answer anything. What's the difference now? Captain Lamont's got away with the gold, ain't he? How the blazes are yuh aimin' to foller? It ain't rained since the time of Noah down where the captain's goin'. Shore, chase him if yuh want to, but Captain Lamont ain't no fool Yank. He's fit timber for a general. What yuh all plannin' to drink if yuh go after him. Yuh didn't have no way of totin' water save in yore canteens when yuh reached Bitter Wells. Our scouts found that out. And it's a cinch yuh ain't got hold of no containers since. Captain Lamont saw to that, good and proper."

Disgusted and apprehensive, Stan dismissed the crowing sergeant. The man had even obligingly drawn a map of Lamont's proposed route, and had jeered at Powell's inability to do anything about it.

One hundred miles on a course carefully chosen to avoid all possible sources of water! If a man detoured to hunt springs it would mean giving up all chance of overtaking the gold. Lamont would be somewhat impeded by the large number of pack-horses necessary, but not hampered enough so that pursuers could take side excursions. And traveling any distance without water in such a country was definitely suicidal.

It looked as though Captain Lamont must win. But what a surprise it was going to be for the captain when Buckner and Cushman turned against him! Powell might have enjoyed thinking of this had it not been for Annis Garner. There was madness in dwelling on what might become of her.

Perhaps Lamont would find a way to foil the pair. He was unusually resourceful. Powell would almost wish the captain luck, then he would remember that Lamont's success in getting the gold through to the South might mean the triumph of the Confederacy. Guns, manufactured goods,

ships, naval and merchant—perhaps even intervention with armed forces by both France and Great Britain.

Stan Powell winced when he thought of what this might mean to the North.

It was the same disheartening story as at Bitter Wells. Again the enemy was only a short distance ahead and again he was unable to follow because of exhausted men and mounts. Only it was worse this time. Then there had been springs within marching distance. Now there was nothing before them but a parched desert, where men must carry water with them or die.

CAPTAIN OCHLETREE'S precipitate action back at Bitter Wells had created this situation. If he had only waited for reinforcements! But no use in harping on that now. The captain was paying for his error every hour he lived. If he had brought kegs with him, Powell could take those and go on, but Ochletree had none.

Yet surely there must be a means of carrying water. When he questioned Shotwell about the matter, Luke shook his head.

"I shore sympathize with yore liquid yearnin's, Stan," Shotwell said, "but the whole question is outside my line. Howsomever, I'll appoint myself a committee to canvass the camp for ideas on how this trick can be turned."

Drung could be of no more help. He had heard of sections of logs and also of sheepskins being converted into receptacles for water, but either of these took a long time to prepare, and they did not possess the right type of material or men who knew how to use it.

While he struggled for a solution, Powell threw himself into the work of making Ochletree's men as comfortable as possible. It helped to divert his mind.

A detail had to be dispatched for further medical supplies and additional stretchers. Taking so many wounded men back was going to entail tremendous work and suffering, and it could not be attempted until Ochletree and his men had been given several days in which to recuperate.

It was nearing midnight before the last wounded man had been transferred to an improvised shelter close to the springs, where there was both shade and the additional coolness supplied by running water.

Powell had just finished cleaning the wound of a man who was suffering from blood poison when Shotwell stepped up to him.

"Stan," he said, "Yeller Jack's got something plumb miraculous to show yuh. I reckon the sky pilots would call it an answer to prayer."

Stan Powell followed his friend to the far side of the Basin. Here, beside one of the biggest of the springs, working by campfire light, the Modocs had butchered several of the poorer ponies and had removed the smaller intestines, cleaning them in sketchy, Indian fashion. This done, they had closed one end of each and now were engaged in pouring water into the other. When thirty or more feet of the intestines had been filled, the tissue was carefully tied. After this a couple of braves wound it round and round the body of a live horse. It looked like a huge link of sausage.

Yellow Jack stepped over to Stan and laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Whistle Blower got plenty water. Much poor pony. Modoc kill tonight and fix. Tomorrow follow enemy. We catch. Whistle Blower gettum gold. Yellow Jack and his braves take plenty Apache scalp. Now rest."

Relaxed and ready for sleep at last, Powell threw himself upon a blanket. Hope made his sudden chance for rest doubly sweet. As he closed his eyes he heard Shotwell talking to Drung.

"Yuh know, Corporal, I admire Yeller Jack's scheme quite considerable, but I aims to be plumb thirsty when I take my first swig from them pony belly fillin's."

AN EARLY start was made the next morning, but every man in Stan Powell's force knew that many hours of long, hard riding were ahead before they could hope to sight Captain Lamont's troops with the Northern gold for the Southern Confederacy.

And it was. Stan Powell felt that years instead of hours and days had passed before at last he wiped the powdered alkali from his eyes and focused his glasses upon a streak of swirling dust. Beyond a doubt it marked the fleeing gold train.

For a long time now signs along the trail told as clearly as written statements that they were overtaking the enemy. Played-out ponies, with slit throats, riddled blankets, and smashed cooking utensils littered the path of flight.

Lamont was sacrificing everything save gold and water in an effort to increase his speed. Certainly the Confederate captain must have some definite objective that he was striving to reach. But now the sudden striking off across baked mud flats, away from the mountains, was baffling. Surely he had no intention of making a stand on the barren plain.

"Apache run Canoe Rock. Stop there."

Canoe Rock. Powell lifted his eyes and had the confirmation to Yellow Jack's statement. Jutting above the layers of opalescent haze that veiled the horizon was one long ridge of rock.

Its ends, both slightly higher than the middle, formed a passable bow and stern, while two sloping ridges, slanting out and downward at right angles to the main bulk, gave an illusion of oars dipping into a shimmering, waveless sea.

As they rode nearer, the green massings of juniper and cedar were discernible along its crest. If trees grew there so, doubtless, did grass. Despite his weariness Powell felt a surge of admiration for Lamont's strategy. Not only had he selected ramparts easy to defend, but he had chosen a place where his livestock could browse while that of his pursuers starved on a naked waste of hardened mud.

Not even a spear of grass or a stick of fine wood from the mesa's lower slopes could be obtained without venturing within gunshot of the summit. And tomorrow, when the sun again rode hot overhead, Lamont, secure in the possession of a greater water supply than his pursuers had, could let his men rest in the shade of the piñons, cracking nuts and jokes, while the attackers sweltered below hourly losing strength.

The more heat, the more thirst. Consequently, the more water consumed. The final results of such a situation were inescapable. But there would be no stalemate here. Stan Powell had learned too much of thirst as a weapon to risk delay. Yellow Jack agreed with this decision. His usually sombre visage glowed with excitement.

"Moons back I promise my people revenge," he exulted. "Tonight Apache pay blood for kill Modoc braves. My young men glad!"

The chief was right. Already the Modocs had sloughed off their weariness and sat straight as ramrods on their ponies. What mattered how hard they had driven themselves the past days? What difference that over half their water was gone? The foe was close and they would fight to avenge the death of their brothers.

Some talked excitedly, their black eyes flashing. Others daubed their faces with war-paint. A few older braves chanted war songs.

FIFTY Modocs and fifteen white men to storm a strong position, held by at least as many Apaches and Confederates! The rest of the Northern force had been left to assist Ochletree's worn company. At first glance the odds looked hopelessly against success, but on the credit side was the nature of Stan Powell's command. Never had any officer selected a more seasoned and thoroughly qualified band of frontier fighters.

Lamont's force, while undoubtedly containing many daring and resourceful men, both white and red, had not been planned solely as a fighting force. He had been compelled to choose a more diversified personnel. He had to have experienced packers to care for his pack-animals, and scouts to pick his trail. These men might, or might not, be good fighters. In addition there was the element of dissension caused by Cushman and Buckner. All told, Captain Lamont had some serious problems.

As Powell and his men approached the butte the last of Lamont's force was reaching the summit. A few min-

utes later the setting sun gleamed red on the defiant folds of a Confederate flag, planted on the edge of the mesa.

"Invitin' us to come right up and take it, ain't they?" observed Shotwell.

"That would suit them fine," Powell agreed. "But we'll choose our own time and way. Sergeant Drung, have the men unsaddle and care for their horses. There'll be the same pint of water ration as usual. Better warn everyone to bury their canteens in the ground for awhile before trying to drink. Bad as this water tastes when cold, it's worse hot."

While the men rested, Powell, Shotwell and Yellow Jack rode slowly around the butte. As they circled it rifle balls kicked up the dust between them and the mesa.

The hill was not large, being something less than a mile in length and half that wide, while the flat expanse on top could scarcely be over half that size. As the inspection proceeded the enormity of the task which confronted them became more apparent. Under cover of darkness it would be easy to reach the foot of the capping sandstone, but getting over that capping was a real obstacle.

Several hundred feet high in most places, and vertical-faced, it extended entirely around the mesa, except for three breaks. These flaws in the natural fortifications were huge cracks that might have been the result of an earthquake. The fissures, several rods wide at the bottom, ran clear to the summit and at so gentle an angle that their upper ends cut far back into the top of the butte. Huge blocks of stone, fallen from the cliff, were strewn over the floors of these ravines, with bunches of stunted brush and bunch-grass growing between.

Simultaneous attacks up all of these fissures offered a fair chance of victory, but it would mean sacrificing many lives. Undoubtedly Lamont had already made plans for transforming each fissure into a death-trap where enfilading fire could be turned on the enemy.

Before any real effort was made to storm the heights someone would have to get on top and learn something of the lay of the land, then signal the findings back to the watchers below. After studying this problem for some time Powell was convinced that there was one spot on the south

end where it might be possible to scale the cliff face instead of going up a ravine. Pointing out the narrow upward-spiraling ribbon of rimrock, he asked:

"Think we can make it, Luke?"

WHEN Shotwell answered he was unusually grave.

"Reckon mebbe yuh might, Stan, if things went our way, but just one little slip—"

There was no need of enlarging on the thought. A fall meant death in a most unpleasant form. "Yuh goin' to try it?" Shotwell asked, after a time.

"Yes. That part of the cliff will be in shadow right after dark, and I don't believe Lamont or his Apaches will be looking for anyone except through the ravines. I'd like to take a couple more men with us—want to be prepared to give the men down below some sort of boost in getting through those narrows."

"Kartchner and Madsen are the only two I'd trust on that sort of gamble," Shotwell said thoughtfully. "Just one little mistake, like a slip or a rock fallin', and we'd be soldered with lead to that cliff in no time. Say, Stan, yuh wasn't by any chance plannin' on gettin' Miss Garner off that hump before the fightin' starts, was yuh?"

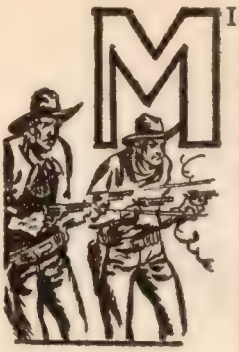
"Luke, I'd give an arm if that were possible. But the most I dare hope for is that I—"

He stopped unable to put his thoughts into words. Always, for each moment of bliss, Annis had brought him hours of apprehension. He could not explain how he had followed her mentally every mile from Fort Sierra, nor could he tell how his dreams were all too frequently turned to nightmares by thoughts of Cushman and Buckner.

What were they doing now? Would darkness never fall, so that he could get started?

CHAPTER XXII

Tried by Fire



MINUTES seemed hours as Powell and his picked men made their perilous climb, but Powell was at the top at last. Seething with impatience he watched the heads of his three companions bob into sight over the rim.

The going had been infernally hard. It had taken three hours to do what he had planned to accomplish in one. Already the moon was setting. Yellow Jack and his braves would wonder what had become of them.

"Still up here, ain't it?" mumbled Shotwell.

The babel of howls and screeches that came might have been his answer. A pistol report cut through the uproar. It was not coyotes, but Indians making the noise, with their yells of maniacal fury. Brush snapped. Men were running across the mesa. Guards challenged in loud voices.

Then as suddenly as it had begun the insane racket ended. Powell and his companions had reached the highest peak of the summit. From below them, and much closer than they had expected, came a clipped command.

"More fuel on the fire, orderly!"

A red pile of embers that before had looked like an inflamed eye, burst into a roaring flame. The front of an army tent leaped into red relief. Beside it stood a bare-headed man, his face and tousled hair reflecting red in the firelight. Captain Lamont. In front of him was another man, with a soldier on either side of him.

"Buckner, how did those Indians get alcohol?" Lamont demanded sternly. "Did you give it to them?"

"No," came Buckner's voice in answer. "They found there was some among the provisions and they stole it."

"But someone had to tell them it was there. Either you or Cushman did that. Buckner, for some time I've suspected you of plotting to steal the gold for your own personal use. But I gave you credit for better sense than to attempt making the play while we were surrounded by Union troops. Speak up, man! What is your game?"

One of the guards prodded Buckner with his bayonet and the prisoner broke into blustery defiance.

"Suh, I'm ready to admit we weah plannin' to take the gold. Who was theah to stop us? The Apaches, all but five or six, ahe on ouah side. Yo' ah outnumbered three to one. If yo' ah sensible, yo'll join up with us, suh. Theah's enough gold foh all of us. All we got to do is hold this hill till the Yanks eitheh die of thirst, or leave. Then we can hit foh Mexico and all live fat. That's bettah than bein' killed by the Yanks and mebbe losin' the wah to boot."

Lamont's arm made a gesture of disgusted fury.

"You blind, addle-witted traitor!" he blazed. "With those Indians full of that red-eye neither you nor any other human can control them! They'll drink our water as they wish, and waste more. It will be us, not the Yankees who will first go thirsty. Sergeant Bryce, select a firing squad!"

It looked as though the captain intended to have Buckner shot on the spot. But at that moment, without warning, and so close that it was startling, Cushman's bass bellowed through the night.

"Lamont, yuh better go easy with Buckner! I got yore sister up here!"

Lamont staggered as though hit, then turned toward the tent as though to investigate the truth of Cushman's statement.

Stan Powell waited no longer. Kicking off his boots, he began sliding down the rocks toward the packer. Cushman could scarcely be expecting an attack from the rear this soon.

A twig snapped and Powell's heart stopped beating. Surely Cushman would hear. But he did not. Speech pouring from his lips had smothered the sound.

"Better tell them soldiers to let him loose, Captain! And stand smack where yuh are till I say yuh can move."

UNDER cover of the shouted words Powell reached a spot only yards behind the burly packer who, rifle in hand, was standing on a ledge, staring down at Lamont. Close by was an Apache holding Annis.

Powell paused, trying hard not to betray his nearness by loud breathing. He must get the Indian first. If that blackguard Cushman would only start talking once more.

The fingers gripping his clubbed revolver were slick with sweat. Changing hands, he wiped his palm dry upon his trouser leg. Then Cushman began shouting again, even more threatening. Now!

Stan Powell leaped. His fingers slid about the Apache's throat and past it, so the Indian's neck was clamped in the bend of Powell's left arm. His gun butt smashed upon the Apache's skull. As he whirled to tackle Cushman, fire gushed from the packer's gun. Annis screamed.

Down below, Lamont's arm came up mechanically in a gesture suggestive of a salute. Slowly he revolved upon his heels and, at a half pivot, pitched forward, face down. Annis' body fell limply in to Powell's arms as Cushman leaped toward them, cursing.

Powell's pistol steadied. He could scarcely miss. Fire licked from the kicking snout—and the impossible happened. Instead of the lead striking against flesh, there was a spang of steel against steel. Harmless, the ball

had caromed from Cushman's rifle. No time now for another shot. No time for anything but to protect Annis with his own body.

As Powell steeled himself for the expected smash of the packer's gun, a dark form catapulted across the ledge, landing on Cushman's shoulders and smashing him to the rocks. A knife arm rose and fell. Powell heard a grunt of satisfaction and knew it came from Shotwell.

He was just bringing Annis back to consciousness when he heard Shotwell's excited exclamation.

"Why, them blasted Modocs have set the brush afire down below!"

The entire mesa was encircled in a crimson glow. Yellow Jack's braves, impatient at the delay, had set the fires so that the rolling smoke would screen their attack. Up the nearest ravine came flames that were swelling to a roar. Floods of sparks geysered from the ravine and swirled across the summit. The fire followed in crimson billows until the men at the top could feel its heat upon their faces.

Voices were lost in the welter of sounds. Things happened so rapidly that only the eye could register what transpired.

On the mesa were too many wide stretches of naked rock for a fire to burn over the entire area, but the decision as to which of these would be safe from cooking blasts held the key of life and death for every living thing on its top. Unpredictable shifts of wind made these ultimate safety zones a sheer gamble. Men and horses sped hither and yon in utter panic.

AS POWELL remembered it, all the time they had been climbing the prevailing wind had been from the south. If so, the place where they now stood would be one of the few spots where human beings could stay without having their lungs seared.

A wedge of fire crept out of the Confederate camp. Its light brought lines of cavalry saddles, packs and piles of boxes into strong relief. A few soldiers, still motivated by instincts of discipline, hurried through the camp, aimless as frenzied ants. But the heat was driving them back.

Stan's gaze focused on Lamont's still form. What a pity that such a man should—

Abruptly he stiffened. Had the captain moved? There it was again. He seized Shotwell by the shoulder.

"Luke, watch Annis! I'm going after Lamont."

"Yuh blasted fool!" Shotwell roared.

Roaring protests followed him down the slope and to the level of the camp. Now he could feel the heat much more intensely. It belched witheringly across the rocks, stinging his nostrils and stabbing his eyeballs. While he advanced, others retreated. A scarlet serpent of flame coiled about the tent and ate. Other wriggling snakes attacked a string of pack-saddles. Boxes of hardtack were burning and a keg of powder exploded.

Powell's head felt as big as a barrel and hooped with red-hot bands.

Ahead of him the cook's equipment was blazing—all but a bucket containing some water. That was steaming. With a dash he reached the pail. Its bail was hot but, when he ripped a sleeve from his shirt, dunked it and spread it over his face, he felt relief. The remaining water he sloshed over Lamont. Then, seizing him by the shoulders he started dragging him out of the red inferno of smoking cinders.

Lamont was beginning to take wobbly steps that lifted part of the weight from Powell when a man stepped quickly from behind a rock and barred the way. With sideburns singed black and his coat-tail hanging in charred streamers, Albert Buckner looked like the Devil himself. Cocked ivory pistols instead of a pitchfork did nothing to spoil this effect.

"Hello, Yank," he grated. "I just wanted yuh to undehstand wheah yuh

were goin' befoh yuh start."

Powell's hand dropped toward his holstered weapon. But there was no time to draw. Anyhow the gun was empty. The wolfish smile on Buckner's face broadened.

"No chance, Yank. I'm goin' to shoot you-all down like a houn' dog. And this time I'll make sure you're done for befoh I pronounce yuh oveh the Great Divide. Afteh which I'll have the pleasure of doin' the same foh Cap—"

Fire spat from beneath Lamont's slumped body. Buckner's mouth opened wide in agony and both his hands clutched at his middle as he sagged to his knees, then toppled over.

Lamont straightened. In his eyes was the old, indomnitable glint, but there was a suggestion of a grim smile about his mouth as he returned his weapon to its holster.

"Mr. Buckner made the mistake of doing all his watching in one direction," he said coolly . . .

THE mesa was quiet now. Fire and battle were both done. In the pallied light of early dawn, Stan Powell surveyed the scene. Except for a few small oases of green, the summit was a darkened waste of charred stumps, smoke-blackened rocks, and heat-shriveled bodies.

Not over a dozen horses were still alive. The burned carcasses of other horses were strewn in every direction.

Men seemed to have been more lucky. Not over a score, including those killed by the Modocs, were dead upon the summit. This did not mean that the others were all safe. Lines of dust far out on the desert showed that Yellow Jack's braves still chased the Apaches. Many would yet be overtaken and scalped. Of the rest a percentage would die from wounds or exposure.

This was victory, yet it brought no thrill. Gold, spilled from fire-gutted boxes, glittered when Powell stirred it with his boot, but there was no glory to its sparkle. It was good to know that it would never change the Nation's destiny. But that was all.

From the lava fields of California to the Nevada desert the battle for its possession had cost the lives of men, both bad and good. Now Powell felt that the fine and gallant never had been enemies. Disputed issues might separate them for a time but, intrinsically, they all belonged to the greater brotherhood of free men.

He was relieved that Lamont's wound had proved to be only a superficial cut upon the scalp. Annis had suffered enough without losing her brother. Besides, Lamont himself was an unusually likeable fellow, if a man met him under proper circumstances, and Powell found it much easier to overcome prejudices when he held the upper hand and Lamont was his prisoner than when he had been at the mercy of the Confederate captain.

The Southerner was grave about his losses. He was giving up a great dream and facing imprisonment for the duration of the conflict, yet he made no noisy complaint. Annis sat silent beside her brother. An occasional tear coursed down her cheek as she tried to offer what meager comfort she could give but, like Lamont, she made no protests.

It had been particularly difficult to tell them that they must be taken back to Fort Sierra, even though both must have guessed it, once the battle was lost. To give them a chance for private conversation, Powell busied himself in giving directions to the men about assembling anything of value that still remained and getting the company organized for the return trip.

The sun was up with its threat of burning heat before they were ready to attempt the climb down the mesa. Stan Powell went back to his prisoners, who rose at his approach. He had not intended to say anything personal but a sudden, uncontrollable impulse

formed the words on his lips.

"Captain Lamont," he said, "I have made no secret of the fact that I love your sister. My superiors at Fort Sierra understand this and they trust me. You may be sure that she will be treated with every courtesy. I shall ask the same for you. I hope you will put no obstacles in the way of my making her happy."

Lamont extended his hand, "I have never held any personal objections to you, Lieutenant Powell. Only political and military differences have stood between us. These still seem rather insurmountable to me, but anything that will make my sister happy will have my blessing. And I shall always be grateful to you for rescuing her and your brave sacrifice in my behalf."

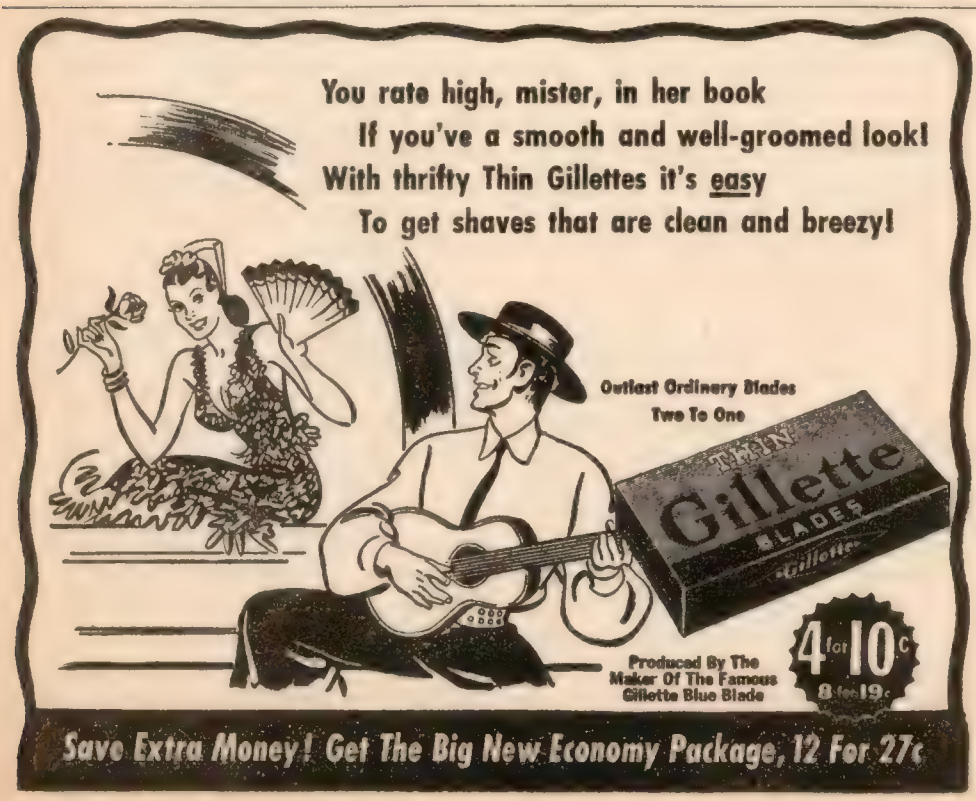
"You did as much for me," Powell said cordially. "Buckner would undoubtedly have shot me if you had not done away with him. But we must not wait for talk. The sun grows hotter, and water is not too plentiful." He put Annis' hand upon his arm. "I do not want you to be burdened more than necessary on this trip, sweetheart, but I salvaged one thing I thought you might want as a keepsake. Put it with your own belongings, if you like."

From under his arm he took a roll of woolen cloth in which there showed a stripe of red and one of white. It unfolded as he handed it to her.

"Our flag!" she breathed, and buried her face in its folds, faded by the desert sun.

Stanley Powell turned his head away. In a measure these tears upon the Stars and Bars were too sacred for prying eyes. Later he would look back again, hoping for smiles for a Union man.

Next Issue's Novel: THE BORDER BRAND, by Larry A. Harris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GHOST IN THE IRON BOX

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Gunsmoke Gorge," "Hard Hombres," etc.

There, in plain view, was the Abilene Kid, shooting

The Singing Kid Doesn't Like "Sneak Work"—but He Proves to Be a First-Class Undercover Deputy Just the Same!

THE string of stickups—of stage-coaches, ranch and mine pay-roll messengers—was so long that people had started laughing in old Sheriff George Tabor's face and calling it a new out-door sport. The robbers chose the most unexpected times and places, used high-pitched voices that nobody recognized, wore full masks and nondescript clothing, left no trail. Some of the victims said there were only two; others swore there were three of them.

Sheriff Tabor had been sweating a pound a day off his already gaunt frame. Then he hit upon a process of elimination. He had just finished boiling his suspects down to four when a slim, blond young cowboy known mostly as "Singing Kid" Abilene came to town for a little visit with him.

As usual, Abilene was singing as he rode, a rollicking old song a Negro camp cook had brought out from Alabama:

Oh, Baby, where you been
So-o-o long?
Oh, Baby, where you been
So-o-o long?

I've been for my gin, and
I'm goin' back ag'in, and
That's where I've been
So-o-o long!

Then he was dismounting and stepping, with spurs jingling, across Tabor's office threshold. Tabor swung around in his desk chair, and his lean, lined face tightened. This Abilene was on his list of suspects.

"Morning, Sheriff," the Singing Kid greeted, grinning broadly. "How's it with yuh?"

"Not so good. What you doin' here?"

Abilene sobered as he dropped into a chair facing the lawman.

"Yuh wouldn't think a wildcat like me would have such a thing as a ma, would yuh?" he said abruptly. "Well, I have—back in Texas. Last week I had a letter from her, and she said if I could locate a cow outfit owned by a Mr. Mortimer Lunderford, somewheres in this country, she was shore he'd give me work. Mebbe yuh've heard about the trouble I have keepin' a range job. But nobody seems to know any Mortimer Lunderford. I thought mebbe you would, Sheriff. Do yuh?"

"I never had that name in my ears before," Tabor said.

He frowned hard, bent forward and flipped open one side of his young visitor's colorful Indian bead work vest, exposing an armpit holster and the hawkbill-shaped butt of a light, fast double-action six-shooter.

"Yuh're too handy with that, son," he grumbled, "and too scrappy. That's why yuh can't keep a range job." He frowned a little. "Look here, Abilene. Just who are yuh? Yore real name, I mean."

THE answer was straightforward. "I'm Johnny Kernan. Named for my dad, who's been dead some years. I reckon yuh know the 'Abilene Kid' thing was saddled on me while I worked on old Tom Abilene's ranch. Well, back there in Texas I'd get sorta wilded up before I knew it, and I come out here to begin all over. Was so dead set on my new leaf that I overdone it, and folks started pickin' on me, and—well, I just busted loose again. . . . Say, I didn't aim to pry, Sheriff, but I couldn't help but notice yuh've got me down on that paper there on the desk with three other yaps. Why?"

"That robber business," the grizzled sheriff said frankly. "We know that one of 'em rides a paint and one a dun. You ride a paint, Kid—and the hold-ups started around the time yuh came to this section, and yuh admit yoreself that yuh're a wild young buckaroo. See where yuh stand, don't yuh?"

"I had nothin' to do with any of that robbin', Sheriff," Kid Abilene said.

Sheriff Tabor's eyes drilled the youthful suspect through. Abilene took it all right—no proof of innocence, however, as the old lawman was aware. But he had liked what he had seen of the Kid—liked his singing, too. And perhaps Tabor had a thought of the young waddy's ma, back in Texas.

"Johnny Kernan," he said, "I've bet on hosses, cards, dice, game-cocks, and jumpin' beans. Now I'm goin' to bet on a man, though it does seem a long shot—and yuh're the man. I'm settin' yuh up in a job. Yuh'll make a plumb good under-cover spotter. Pretending yuh want to join up with the other suspects—savvy? They've heard of yore raisin' the devil and, shore, even if they don't know yuh,

and likely they'll take yuh on. Then we can set us a trap and nail 'em. Savvy?"

Without answering the Singing Kid read from the list on the sheriff's desk.

Sputter Sampson
Spanish Carver
Jim Winchester

"I don't know 'em," he said then. "What makes yuh so shore about one or all of them bein' the stick-up fellers, Sheriff?"

Tabor shrugged. "I'm not shore at all. Leavin' you out for the present, I just figger it could easier be Sampson and Carver and Winchester than anybody else. For one thing, Winchester has got a paint hoss. Well, yuh taking the job?"

"No, Sheriff." The Singing Kid shook his head. "That's sneak work. Not my kind of stuff."

"Honor, eh?" The old lawman's voice fairly cracked. "Honor, yore Aunt Maria! The jiggers robbed a woman on the Dry Fork stage last week, and an old, sick woman at that! I wonder now, if yuh ain't a member of that bunch?"

The eyes of Kid Abilene were like blue ice as his voice cracked:

"All right, big law dog. Swear me in, and I'll pin the deputy badge inside my britches waistband where it won't show. Then yuh can tell me where to find them three and I'll hit their trail."

Tabor obliged promptly. Sampson and Carver were partners in a small cow outfit, he explained, though that might be only a blind, about nine miles south of town, in wild country. Jim Winchester lived alone a few miles from the Carver-Sampson place, and also ran cows. Sort of odd, was this Winchester. For instance, he kept a triple-locked old stage strong-box in his house, told people there was a ghost in the box, and looked like he meant it. . . .

"Sputter" Sampson, who stammered, was a thick, squat, reddish man. "Spanish" Carver also was squat and thick, but dark. The ranch-house the two lived in wasn't much more than a shanty. It stood at the head of a narrow little range shut in by rocky hills, and it was there that Singing Kid Abilene was riding a few hours after he had been made a reluctant deputy.

"I hear s-s-s-somebody s-s-s-singin'," stuttered Sampson, and went out

to the ramshackle front porch. Carver followed. There they could make out the words of the song the oncoming rider they saw and heard was singing.

I'll take my bridle in my hand,
And outride that whole Ranger band . . .

Para Mejico, para Mejico—
Pondre mi caballo para Mejico!

Young Abilene knew songs of half a dozen kinds, and usually picked them to suit occasions. He had rearranged this one with its devil-may-care tune to his own notion.

HE reined his paint to a halt within a rod of the partners, made a quick and correct decision as to their identity, and introduced himself by nickname.

"Mebbe yuh've heard of me," he said pridefully.

The two older men swapped glances. They had heard of him, all right.

"Not sorry to see yuh, yuh little ring-tailed hellion," Spanish Carver said. "Happens we need a range rider.

Only had a couple, and one left us last night. Want the job?"

"I've not had a heap of luck ridin' range lately," Kid Abilene told them, his eyes slitted with meaning. "There's things that pay a good deal more money."

Neither Carver nor Sampson spoke. When the stillness became awkward, Abilene fired a question:

"Either of yuh know a rancher named Mortimer Lunderford?"

"No," answered the partners, in unison. Then Carver said: "We'll see yuh after awhile, Kid. Wait here."

He beckoned to Sampson, and with him turned into the house. Of course they meant to discuss him, Abilene knew. He rode around a bit, noted that there was no bunkhouse, saw nothing of any paint horse or any dun. But horses could be kept hidden easily enough.

On the edge of the narrow range he met an old cowboy with the face of a wolf. The *viejo* refused conversation.

Then the Kid was called back to the shantylike ranchhouse with a yelled "Hallou!" When he was back in front of the porch, Sputter Sampson, his pale eyes sharp, began:

"We g-g-g-get yuh, Kid. We-we-we're go-go-go-goin' to s-s-s-see how s-s-s-smart yuh are. We-we-we-we—"

"Lemme have it, Sput," cut in Spanish Carver. "Sometimes I get afraid yuh'll bust wide open, just tryin' to talk. Well, younker, do yuh know a gent name of Jim Winchester?"

"I shore don't. Why?"

"Lives in the hills three miles straight west of here," said Carver, and hastened on: "In Jim's house they's an iron box, and he claims they's a ghost in it. Loco? Not him! But they *is* somethin' in it. Now, Kid, see if yuh can read my mind!"

The Kid smiled a little.

"Yuh want me to find out what's in the box, and then come back and tell yuh." he guessed.

"And do-do-don't come ba-ba-back un-un-un-un—"

"Until yuh've found out," Carver finished for his partner.

And those few words were enough to give Singing Kid Abilene an idea that Sheriff George Tabor's suspicions concerning this pair had a solid base.

"See yuh later," was all he said though, and rode straight west.

THERE wasn't much else he could do. Anyway, he wanted to give Jim Winchester a sizing up. It was likely, he thought, that he had passed muster in a way with Sampson and Carver, and would have to pass muster with Winchester before he got anywhere as an under-cover deputy. His visit with the first two suspects, he reflected, had been nothing much in the nature of an ordeal.

"Bet it won't be so easy, where I'm goin' now though," he told his spotted horse—and that was a first-class bet. "Ghost in a box, humph? There I'll get me a great big laugh!"

Since Carver had called traveling directions after him, he had no difficulty finding the Winchester place. The house was of logs, and larger, it occurred to him, than any one man needed. It stood just inside a gap with steep walls. Beyond stretched a steep-walled basin a mile in length and almost that in width, an ideal cattle range. The cows in sight were fat, and all Herefords.

This time Johnny Kernan, Singing Kid Abilene, did not pick the song that he used to announce his coming. It was just there and burst out:

> Sally in the garden,
> A-siftin' sand!
> Polly in the parlor
> With a cross-eyed man!
> *Yee-o-la-hoo-oo!*

On the front gallery Jim Winchester had risen. He was in his middle forties, tall and as straight as

any arrow, with the keenest pair of steel-gray eyes that Abilene had ever seen in a man's head. If he was a stick-up, he was a kingpin stick-up—no doubt of that. His gaze settled hard on the Kid, and his lips spat a single word as his appreciation of the song.

"Tripe."

The Kid, sitting his saddle easily, grinned.

"Then see how yuh like this"—he called, and did his level best with part of a ballad that was old when he was born:

> Oh, Ella Ree—
> And how she was found!
> Shot through the heart,
> Lying cold on the ground!

"'Light and come in," said Jim Winchester.

The Singing Kid grinned again. "Thanks. But I'll look after my nag first, if yuh don't mind."

"Shore. Make yourself at home."

Abilene rode to the corral. There he found a big paint horse. He off-saddled and watered his own paint, and staked it to lush creek-bank grass.

When he returned to the front of the log house, Winchester was not in evidence. He called but had no response. Make himself at home, the rancher had said, so he walked into the living room, which was roughly but comfortably furnished. He peered through open doorways and into two comfortably furnished bedrooms.

Under one of the beds he saw an iron box.

He had just stepped into that room and bent for a closer view of it when there was the crash of a shot, which seemed to come from everywhere and yet from nowhere in particular, and his hat jumped off. A warning shot, this was, and a good one. Instinctively the Kid snatched his fast .41 hook-bill from leather under his arm.

Springing to an open window, he looked out, saw nobody. But not far off grew a tall clump of chaparral that could have hidden both a man and powdersmoke.

WHEN Jim Winchester showed up a little later his youthful visitor was seated in a rocker on the front gallery. Abilene's host now had a big, staghorn-handled Colt six-shooter holstered below his hip.

"I see a fresh bullet-hole in yore hat there, cowboy," Winchester remarked, without smiling.

"Yeah," drawled Abilene. "Making myself at home, you know."

"I played a little trick on yuh," Winchester said. "Now and then somebody comes tryin' to find out what's in that old stage strong-box of mine. Got an idea there's money in it, I reckon. Some sense to that. I raise fine cattle, and get a fine price for 'em, and my payroll is only sixty dollars a month for two Mex *vaqueros*. Somehow I doubted that the box was what brought yuh though. Seems I was mistaken. Did Sput Sampson and Spanish Carver send yuh?"

Abilene remained silent.

"They've had other spies here for the same reason, being afraid to come themselves—the yellow snakes." Winchester remarked. I'm glad yuh didn't deny it. I somehow don't like to think of yuh as a liar."

The Singing Kid's gaze locked with the rancher's. The young waddy felt sure that this rancher and the other two suspects were not working together in the stick-up game, whoever was in it. He found himself admiring Jim Winchester.

"I've got a question to ask yuh, hombre," he said impusively. "I somehow don't want to think of you as a liar, either. Yuh ever pulled any stick-up?"

That was blunt and bold, he realized, but the answer also was blunt and bold, amazingly so.

"Yes. Dozens of 'em. Why?"

"I kind of hate to believe that," Abilene said.

Winchester half smiled. He asked his visitor's name then, and showed no surprise when the young cowboy said he was known mostly as Singing Kid Abilene.

"Yuh've been tellin' folks that there's a ghost in yore iron box," he muttered, curious, and saw Winchester turn coldly serious fast.

"There is," the man said promptly, and changed the subject instantly. "Son, yuh look hungry, "he declared. "Let's find somethin' to eat. I get lonesome here, and I don't believe I'm goin' to mind how long yuh stay. One of my Mex cowboys has got a guitar. How about playin' that and singing to to it?"

AFTER Singing Kid Abilene had been on that ranch for two days he had never seen a man he liked better than he liked this lone rancher, barring his dead father. Worry was in Abilene's soul now. He was puzzled, too. Jim Winchester rode a paint horse, one with spirit, which would be fast on a get-away. He had confessed to dozens of hold-ups, too. But why should he do such things, with his Hereford outfit paying so well? Was that just in his blood?

Sheriff Tabor had told the Kid that the robbers had robbed a sick woman. This was what stuck the Kid. Winchester wouldn't do that—he knew it. The man might be hard—though the Kid doubted even that—but he wouldn't rob a sick woman, or any other woman.

And yet, Abilene went on worrying.

"I think I know what's eatin' you," said Winchester when they had finished supper together at sundown of the third day.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This mornin' I had a glimpse of a deputy-sheriff's badge hid inside yore trousers waistband. Then I went to puttin' things together. They made sense. What will yuh do about it, young feller?"

Abilene was suddenly bewildered. Remembering again the letter from his mother in Texas, he thought of riding to town, turning the law badge in, and hightailing out to look for the Mortimer Lunderford ranch. Still, for some reason he hated to think about leaving Jim Winchester, or turning in the information that he had confessed to pulling stick-ups.

"What would yuh do in my place, Jim?" he asked slowly.

The rancher studied him for a full minute before he answered.

"Kid, I've wondered a heap about yuh. Any reason why yuh can't tell yore real name to me." This Singin' Kid Abilene don't sound like one to me."

"Why, no, there's no reason for not tellin' my name. It's just that it hasn't been used much lately, and folks hereabouts have all got used to my nickname. My real one's Johnny Kernan. I'm from Texas, and named for my dad, who's been dead a long time now. Back home I was on the edge of the owlhoot before I knew it, and on account of my ma I come out here to start all over again. But—oh, well, mebbe yuh can guess how it was."

Jim Winchester had not changed countenance by even the flicker of an eyelash. Presently he said:

"Odd that the sheriff would make yuh a deputy, when yuh'd gone and got yoreself such a devil-raisin' rep."

Abilene told him about it, and how he had been a robbery suspect, especially as he rode a paint horse.

"There's lots of paint horses," Winchester said, "and lots of duns. The thing is to catch the two colors together in a hold-up. I never saw Sput Sampson or Spanish Carver ridin' either color hoss—which needn't mean a thing. But just the same, I'm bettin' them robbers is Sput and Spanish. Suppose we set a trap baited with my iron box, catch 'em and clear our-

selves? If we take 'em to town on a dun and a paint the court'll do the rest. Better sleep on it, mebbe. . . . Now, how about you gettin' Jose's guitar and givin' us that Lone Green Valley' song, Kid?"

It was sentimental and tragic, that ancient ballad, as most such ballads are. Strange, Abilene thought, Jim Winchester's running to sentiment this way. The man had been a dare-devil—was still a dare-devil—yet "Green Valley" always dimmed his steel-gray eyes.

"Mebbe it's a case of the finest gold hid down in the hardest quartz," muttered Abilene, and Winchester wanted to know what in time he was talking about.

The Kid grinned, and hummed as he went for the guitar.

Old Granny Dare,
Whatche doin' there,
Settin' on a hillside
Talkin' to a bear!

Around nine o'clock the next morning, Johnny Kernan, Kid Abilene, rode like a streak up to the shanty-like ranchhouse of Sampson and Carver. He hallooed, heard heavy footsteps inside, and called:

"Hustle, you two! Everything's set!"

The squat pair ran out buckling on six-shooters.

"Wha-wha-what made it ta-ta-take yuh so l-l-l-long?" Sampson sputtered. "Did yuh f-f-f-find out what's in the buh-buh-buh-box?"

"We shore ain't takin' chances with Winchester until we know," Carver declared.

"Three locks on that box!" the Kid broke in. "How could I find out what's in it? But I can tell yuh this. Jim Winchester is right now ridin' alone towards the bank in town with that iron box on his saddle! And if there ain't big money in it, why would he take it there? We can easy head him off at White Horn Creek, and stick him up from the trees!"

That would surely be nailing them with the goods on, if they rode the paint and the dun. They would find themselves looking at a graveyard in the barrel of his hookbill a split second after they had given the hands-up order.

Then suddenly Abilene caught his breath. He was staring into the barrel of Spanish Carver's gun, and the dark eyes beyond the sights were filled with murder!

WISELY Abilene lifted empty hands. He should have been watching for this he told himself angrily. Sampson stepped to him and reached up for his .41 hookbill.

"We're leavin' yuh tied here, younker, till we come back," Carver growled. "She might be a trap."

Carver yelled for their wolf-lean old range rider, who appeared at once. Soon the young under-cover deputy lay bound wrist and ankle on the front room floor. Guarding him was the cowboy *Viejo* with the .41 in his hand and a battered but serviceable .45 in leather at his hip. His squinted eyes were like those of a laughing, mangy old lobo.

The drumming of hoofs outside began to fade, and then Abilene fully realized Jim Winchester's peril. Though he was a dead shot and a fast one, too, Winchester would have no chance with Sampson and Carver hidden behind creek cottonwoods. And he wouldn't give up the box, even if there wasn't a dollar in it. That was a simple matter of principle.

"Jim'll be shot waitin' for me to do my part," Abilene groaned to himself. "He'll think I failed him!"

He had to escape, and he had to be quick about it. Lucky his paint horse was a road-eater—if he could get to him. He whipped his brain for an idea. Anything was fair now. Fair? Heck a man didn't fight rattlesnakes with talcum powder!

"Old-timer," he said to the old rider after two minutes or three, "how much money yuh want to let me go?"

This had the desired effect. Wolf-face rose with a thin, avaricious grin, went to him, and stooped to go through his pockets. The Kid drew his feet up swiftly and kicked with every shred of his strength. The slim, long cowboy boot-heels nearly drove holes in the chest of his guard. Wolf-face dropped like a stick and lay still.

The Kid scrambled frantically to his feet, and crow-hopped into the kitchen. There should be some of the breakfast fire left in the stove. With an elbow he shoved a kettle off an open eye, stuck his hands in the fire-box. In burning the short length of rope that held his wrists he burned himself, but this didn't matter. He was soon at work on his ankle bonds.

The Singing Kid caught up both his .41 and the old cowboy's .45 as he ran for his horse. Wolf-face knew, but he was too weak and too nauseated to care very much. . . .

Jim Winchester's horse stopped for water when they came to the creek. With sharp eyes Winchester combed the cottonwoods and underbrush to right and to left. The very second he heard Abilene's voice he was going to let the iron box fall and snap into action. He didn't want Abilene risking too much.

Out to his left then he glimpsed two tiny patches of blue that he knew to be the blue of bandanna masks—and there came a voice speaking in snarling falsetto. Sputter Sampson's, with no stammering.

"Drop the box!"

An ominous metallic click accompanied the order. Winchester did not obey. Nor did he court death by reaching for his gun. He paled. Where was the Kid? The stillness ached. There was another menacing click.

"Drop the box!"

Then, from a point just beyond the pair of stick-ups came a shout:

"Reach up and freeze!"

And there was the Kid. His deputy badge was in plain view on his left shirt pocket. Carver and Sampson jerked around and began shooting instantly. But Abilene also was shooting. It made a continuous blasting roar, not spaced at all.

Winchester was puma-quick. But when he came upon the scene the firing had stopped and the three participants were down and lying motionless. Abilene's smile was weak. So was his voice.

"They rode a paint—and a dun, Jim. They—" He broke off with an ear cocked to a growing staccato of hoof-beats. "Who's—that, Jim?"

WINCHESTER was kneeling beside the Kid, and in the rancher's face there was anxiety.

"It's the sheriff, son," he said. "After yuh left I got afraid for yuh, and sent one of my boys to town after him. Wanted him to meet us here and back yuh up. I was afraid Pepe wouldn't make as good time as he did."

Johnny Kernan, Singing Kid Abilene heard that dimly. When things were clear to him again, he occupied a bed in Sheriff Tabor's home, was half bandages, and smelled like a drug-store. But Jim Winchester was with him.

"The doc said yuh'd be all right, Johnny," Winchester was saying. "Sput and Spanish are shot up as bad as you are. But they won't die either, though Sput thought he would and talked enough to clean our slates. Funny how he can jump his voice to that high pitch and not stutter! That's why he was never recognized in a stickup by his talk. Well, Kid, I owe it to yuh to tell yuh about the dozens of stick-ups I pulled:

"It was in Texas, a long time ago. I surrendered, stood trial and was cleared but cleared with a bad name, and came out here to start all over

again just like you did. I worked hard and finally paid back all the money I'd taken. Used a different name here. But now that I owe no man a centavo, I'm going back to my old name. That name is Mortimer Lunderford, Johnny."

Young Kernan closed his eyes and let that soak in. Then he looked up.

"Bein' from Texas, Jim, not much wonder my ma knew yuh. Did my dad know yuh, too?"

Winchester seemed not to have heard. He was staring as though at something a thousand miles away. He hummed, so low that the ears of the Singing Kid barely got it:

> Look down the lone green valley,
> Where the flowers bloom and fade.
> It's there that blue-eyed Ellen—

Johnny smiled. Sentiment; finest gold hidden down in hardest rock. But Johnny didn't know anything yet!

"Yore ma and I were kid sweethearts, son," Winchester told him. "For years we wrote each other letters and mailed 'em in an old tree. Hundreds of letters. I never could destroy hers—they're the ghost in the iron box. . . . We had a quarrel, and she married John Kernan. . . .So he's been dead for years? I'm goin' back to Texas to see if she'll have me. What do you think?"

Young Kernan, Kid Abilene, was not so flabbergasted that his mind didn't work right.

"I wish yuh good luck, Jim," he said, "and I reckon yuh'll have it."

"Viva Villa! Viva la Revolucion!"

That's the Stirring Cry That Rings Out Over the Rangeland When Villistas Raid on Both Sides of the Rio

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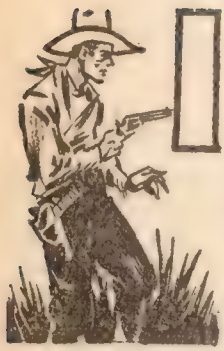


IN A tiny gold-mining camp on the bank of Wild Creek, high in the Sierras, Dan Westrick lay on a hard cot in a small room back of Sheriff Codgin's office. He didn't know where he was until later. At first he was only conscious of dim light coming through a tiny square window someplace over his head. Then gradually he was able to see things about him. There was a throbbing pain in his forehead.

Dan Westrick raised his hand weakly. He rubbed his fingertips over the spot that hurt. There was an old scar there, a long, white, gashlike mark that was a memento of a brush with Indians. When he was bad hurt, as he was now, or whenever there was an unusual strain on his nerves, that place over his right eye ached and tormented him. Pain seemed to center there.

Westrick was too weak to do much more than feel of his forehead. He felt nauseated. His whole body pained terribly. He was going to die, he guessed. And Westrick didn't want to die yet. He was only thirty and had a future. He shifted his weight, tried to turn on his side. Hot daggers of flaming pain seared him. Black and white spots danced before his eyes. He passed out again.

Faced With a Problem That He Keeps Strictly to Himself, Dr. Rossbird Fights to Stave Off the Grim Reaper!

WHEN he became conscious once more there was stronger light. Things seemed brighter. He remembered now about his horse losing its footing on the trail and plunging down an embankment with him. He groaned softly. It must now be morning, and he had been unconscious all night.

The pain over his eyes was still intense. By shifting gently he could tell that something was badly wrong with his side.

There was a stir at the head of his cot, and a youngish woman came within his range of vision. She put a cool hand on his fevered brow.

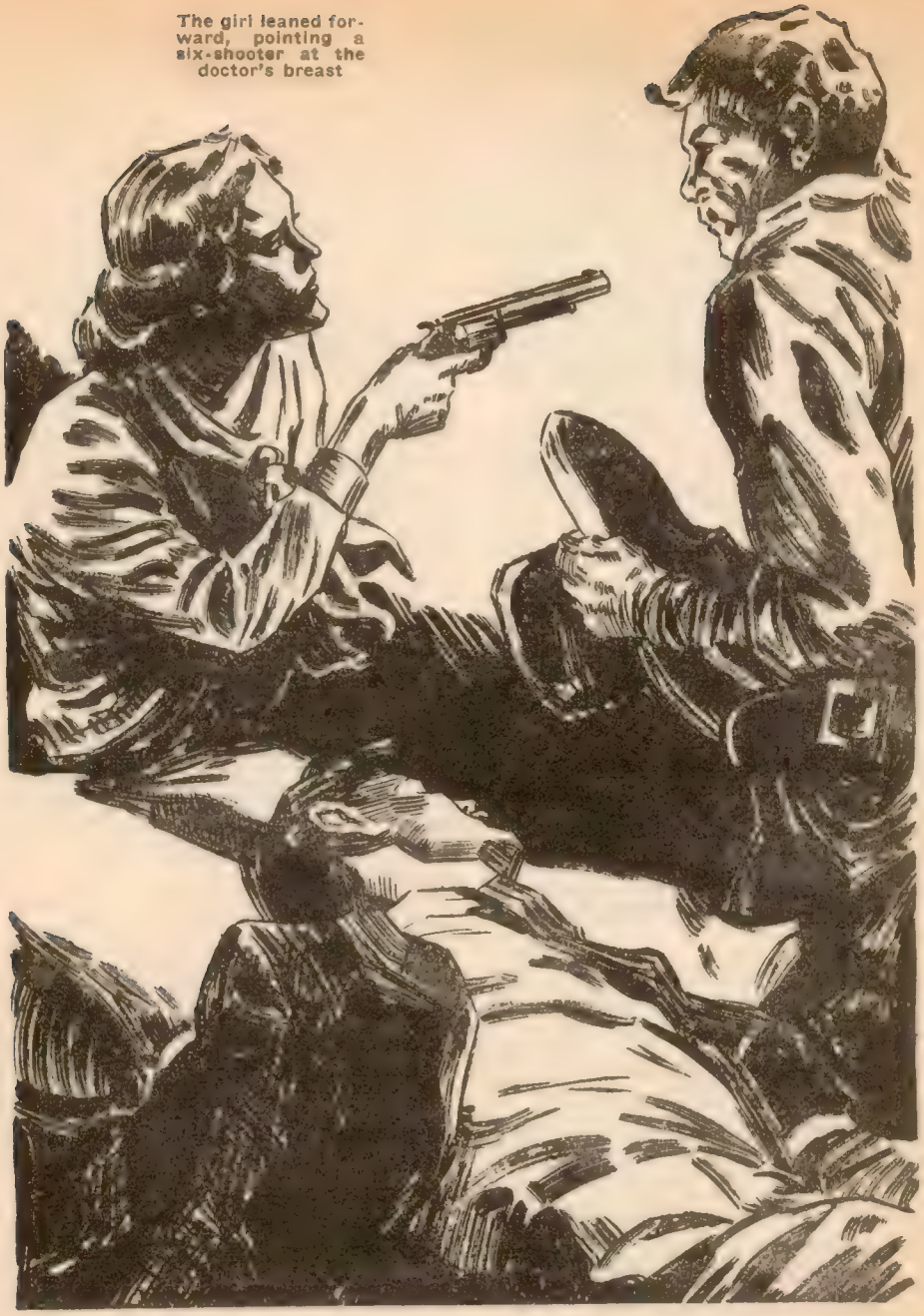
"You are awake now?" she murmured soothingly. "Don't try to move. Dad's bringing the doctor. I am Maggie Codgin."

Westrick stared up at her silently through a haze of pain. Then a man's gruff voice sounded in the front office. It was the sheriff returning.

"This stranger's gonna die if something ain't done for him right away," the sheriff was saying.

"I'll look at him, but I won't promise to do anything," a second voice replied calmly. "I told you I didn't come here to practice medicine."

The door creaked open, and two men entered. "This is my daughter," the sheriff said to his companion.



The girl leaned forward, pointing a six-shooter at the doctor's breast

"Maggie, this is the sawbones. Yonder's yore patient, Doc."

Westrick was aware of the approach of the two men, but he didn't turn his head. He was afraid he'd pass out again. The girl murmured something. The doctor bent over him.

"I had a heck of a time findin' you," the sheriff was saying. "All I had to go on was some of the boys sayin' a feller who claimed he was a doctor back East was workin' somewhere along the creek. I couldn't let this stranger die here on my hands without no medical attention, so I kept huntin' till I found yuh."

"I wish you hadn't," the doctor said frankly, eying the patient.

He was middle-aged and had a pointed nose and two cold-looking

gray eyes. There was a trace of black mustache on his thin upper lip, and his hair was graying.

"I got it figured," Codgin was saying as the doctor felt Westrick's pulse, "that when his hoss lost its footin', the two of 'em went over the bank and he broke a couple of ribs. If I ain't plumb wrong, some of them bones is ready to stick through his lungs. If they do, he's a goner."

The doctor felt of the injured man's side. Hit touch was gentle enough; in fact, Westrick marveled at how careful and expert his long fingers seemed when they probed at his ribs. But even that gentle pressure was too much for his weakened condition. The terrific pain stabbed through him again. The room swam in darkness and he was out for a while.

WHEN he became conscious again the doctor was saying almost bitterly: "This is a major operation, Sheriff. I haven't any instruments. Besides, I didn't come to Wild Creek to hang out a shingle. I came for gold."

The sheriff had a heavy voice. He spoke now in a tone that commanded respect. "They's fifty men, more or less, workin' the creek, Doc. They's no sawbones closer'n Sacramento. In a camp like this every man's expected to do his share. This hombre'll die if yuh don't operate, won't he?"

"He will that," the doctor admitted.

The sheriff went on quietly. "Since I been inquirin' around, I found out some things about you, Doc. Seems like yuh came here to keep an eye on the Crowbar claim up at the head of the flat. Maybe if yuh turn down this job I'll be inquirin' into what makes yuh so interested in that claim."

The doctor whirled around angrily. "There's no secret about that," he said bluntly. "I'm Carl Rossbird. Jim Rossbird was my brother. Jim owned half-interest in the Crowbar claim."

Dan Westrick felt his nerves tingle. The spot in his forehead ached unmercifully now. But he clung hard to consciousness. By straight force of will, he fought back the weakness that reached out to claim him.

"Jim Rossbird had a partner," the sheriff said. "It was before my time and I ain't never seen neither man. But the miners say they had an agreement between 'em regardin' the claim. If either one died the other'n was to have it. That claim is mighty rich, Doc. Every miner here knows it's rich. That's why none of 'em touched it nor ever tried to work it. It's likely any feller who turns a shovel in it without provin' his legal rights first will meet up with a belly full of lead."

"My brother's partner's name was Daniel Westrick," Carl Rossbird said. "If Westrick's dead, the mine belongs to me. Westrick didn't have any heirs. They agreed that if they both died, being next of kin, I was to have the Crowbar Claim."

The sheriff hesitated slightly, his dark eyes narrowing. "Sounds reasonable enough. Only hitch is, yuh can't prove Westrick's dead."

"He hasn't been here for a year. Everybody agrees on that. He came East at the same time as my brother. Jim died in our home in Missouri. He gave me a copy of the partnership agreement, and I got it with me."

"Yeah, maybe so," Sheriff Codgin admitted dubiously. "But we're gettin' off the subject. Question is, will yuh try to save this poor hombre, or yuh gonne let him lay here and die?"

Dr. Rossbird turned again to Dan Westrick. The injured man watched the doctor's eyes as he bent over the cot. Tortured thoughts pounded through his foggy brain. Would the doctor operate? Could he save him if he did? But what bothered Dan Westrick was the terrible thought, would the doctor try to save him? Did he know it to be Daniel Westrick

he had at his mercy? If Dan Westrick died, the Crowbar mine would be Rossbird's in entirety.

Rossbird picked up the patient's hand and moved his arm carefully. The pain made Westrick's brain spin in darkness again. He tried to speak. But he only mumbled incoherently. He was going to die all right. He was conscious only by jerks and jumps. His mind functioned like the sun shines in a windy, cloud-swept sky. A lot of the time it was blurred over and dim. Sometimes it was blotted out entirely.

"I don't know if I can save him," Carl Rossbird finally said. "One of those bones may already have punctured a lung."

"He ain't spittin' blood," Codgin reminded. The lawman's voice sounded like the verdict of a judge. "Yuh're in the West now, Doc. We expect yuh to do somethin'. Yuh won't be very popular 'round here if yuh don't."

The doctor stood a long time looking down at Dan Westrick lying helpless there on the cot. He seemed to be undecided. Westrick had a little spell of clear consciousness. He wasn't able to speak, but he tried hard to put a smile on his face. He guessed it was more like a grimace, but it seemed to make Rossbird bite his lip, his fingers clenching and relaxing.

"I can't do it!" said the doctor harshly. "I *won't* do it!"

AGAIN Westrick became conscious of the girl who had been silent during all this talk. To the injured man's dull amazement, Maggie Codgin leaned forward and there was a six-shooter in her strong hand. She leveled the gun at the recalcitrant doctor's breast.

"Dr. Rossbird," she said fiercely, "this man will die if you don't give your help. If you don't operate at once, I'll shoot you down where you stand."

The doctor started and stared at the girl. The sheriff remained discreetly silent. Then Rossbird relaxed and smiled faintly.

"I believe you'd actually do it," he said admiringly. "But you don't have to threaten me. I'll do my best. Get some clean sheets and hot water quickly. Sheriff, see what sort of knives you can scare up. They'll have to be sharp. Get some carbolic acid for disinfectant. And maybe you'd better get a good steady-nerved woman to help."

"I will help," said Maggie Codgin.

Dan Westrick shuddered inside. He had caught a glimpse of strangeness in Doc Rossbird's hard eyes. The doctor, he thought, knew who he was. He couldn't see how Rossbird could have found out.

The sheriff didn't know him. Codgin hadn't been here when Westrick had gone east. Rossbird had never seen him before. But the man was his enemy. Rossbird was going to see that he died. Somehow, Dan Westrick felt sure about that. Greed and selfishness was the only code that ever worked out in a gold camp. A man took what he could. This hard-eyed doctor knew who he was and was going to get rid of him once and for all. He was just making a bluff to keep in good standing with the sheriff and with the miners.

Rossbird would own the Crowbar Claim. That was what Dan Westrick decided before he went under. He didn't know any more for a week.

When he became conscious he was hardly able to think. At first he was surprised at being alive. He moved his eyes and found he was still in the same little room. Things had been tidied. A curtain hung at the window.

He was awfully weak. He was stiff from lying so long. It hurt to move. But the nauseating pain was gone from his side. The scar over his eye didn't hurt like it had.

The room was empty. But soon a rather large woman came in. It was the sheriff's daughter. She was startled for a moment when she saw the patient's eyes were open. Then she smiled and spoke cheerily.

"You're getting well. I'm glad." She stepped outside and brought him some water to sip. An hour later she brought some broth.

Westrick's lips felt stiff but he managed to say, "Thank you."

"Just rest," the girl ordered. "Don't try to talk. Doc'll be in pretty soon."

Westrick let his eyes drift shut. His mind was clearer now. It kept getting clearer. He remembered about the Crowbar mine and the fight he was sure to have with Carl Rossbird about it. So the doctor hadn't known who he was after all. He'd operated and saved Dan's life.

Ordinarily Westrick would have thought that he owed the doctor a lot. But he remembered how Rossbird had acted. He remembered the look of indecision and doubt he had seen in his eyes. Rossbird, he figured, had operated just because the sheriff had scared him. Rossbird hadn't cared a damn about Dan Westrick. He'd just been looking out for himself.

Still, no matter how Dan looked at the matter, he had to admit that if it hadn't been for Rossbird, he'd have died. He kept thinking about it, wondering. He kept asking himself how he should act toward the doctor. He wondered if any of the miners who knew him had been in while he was unconscious. Had Rossbird subsequently found out who he was? What would happen when he did find out?

LATER he was aroused by a quick step outside. The door squeaked on its hinges. Dan Westrick turned his head and saw Rossbird there in the doorway.

The doctor stood still. His face was lighted up and he looked a lot different than Dan Westrick had thought. His eyes were not so cold now. They looked animated and happy. Westrick wondered if maybe there had been worry in those eyes when he'd seen them before. He couldn't help warming to the dignified gray-haired man that smiled so much like Jim Rossbird.

Rossbird stepped close to the cot. He picked up Dan's hand and checked his pulse with his fingers. "It's a relief to see how you've come around," he said, and sighed deeply.

Westrick didn't say anything. He kept looking at the doctor, trying to read what he saw in his face. Finally he spoke.

"I guess I owe you my life, Doc."

Rossbird's lips parted as if he would speak. He seemed to change his mind and was silent a second or two. "Get some rest," he said. "You can thank me tomorrow."

Westrick lay there and watched the doctor go out. He was puzzled. There was something about Carl Rossbird he could not understand. Then Maggie brought him some food and a clean pillow.

"You'll be able to get up in a week or ten days," she told him. "Soon as the doctor got the jagged point of that rib pulled away from your lung you started to gain. It's too bad you couldn't see how that man worked over you. It took nearly two hours. I never did see a man do things so careful. Perspiration poured off him while he was working. A body would of thought you was his own brother."

Dan Westrick laid down the spoon with which he was eating his broth and stared at her in a puzzled sort of way. "He seemed that anxious to save me?"

The girl smiled proudly. "You'd think his life depended on it."

Westrick finished eating slowly and thoughtfully. He kept trying to puzzle it out and finally fell off to sleep. The next morning the woman

brought him some breakfast. About an hour afterward, Doc Rossbird stopped in. He had a little bag with him and he set it down inside the door.

"Stopped to say good-by," he said. "No use me staying any longer—now that you'll be able to look after your mine."

"My mine?" Dan Westrick asked innocently. "What mine?"

Rossbird looked doubtful just a second. Then he smiled confidently. "You're Dan Westrick, aren't you?"

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody had to tell me. I knew it right away. That scar over your eye. My brother told me about that."

"Oh." Westrick hardly believed what he was hearing.

Rossbird laughed softly. "That's why I was so damned scared," he admitted. "That's why I was afraid to operate. To tell the truth, Westrick, I didn't think you had a chance. I figured the chances were ten to one you would die. I was lucky, that's all.

"If you'd died, I wouldn't have given much for my own chances. When the sheriff and miners found out who you were they'd figure I let you die to get the Crowbar claim. They might even have strung me up. It was the biggest chance I ever had to take. Rossbird paused and laid a comforting hand on Dan's shoulder. "But I'm glad I took it. It's worth everything to see you lying here smiling. But you can thank Maggie Codgin for pulling you through."

Doc Rossbird straightened up. He moved toward the door and picked up his bag. But he didn't go out. Sheriff Codgin came in at that moment, and Dan Westrick found strength to raise on his elbow.

"Sheriff," he said in a firm, commanding tone, "if you let the doctor leave before I'm well enough to give him what he's got coming, I'll get the boys and run you out of town."

Codgin looked at Rossbird, surprised. Rossbird looked at Dan Westrick inquiringly.

"That's my new partner," Dan said proudly. "Don't let him go."

Codgin laughed. He seemed to understand. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and jestingly slipped them on Rossbird's wrists.

"The law's taking yuh into custody till yuh get all yuh deserve," he joked. "Half interest in the richest claim on the creek."

Westrick looked up at the girl. "As for you, Miss Codgin, I—well, I'll try to show you my appreciation when I get up and can use my arms."

EL MUCHACHO

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Brand of the Owlhoot," "Lawman Lee," etc.

The outlaws met their rush with a savage burst of gunfire

Sheriff Stubblefield Proves Himself a Fighting Lawman When He Sets a Trap Baited With Blazing Bullets!

OLD Sheriff Bob Stubblefield had seen a lot of death in his days. During forty years as a Frontier lawman, he had come to accept it as part of the day's work. An unpleasant part of it, to be sure, but something a lawman had to take impersonally.

But tonight he was riled up until he saw red. And not altogether on account of this last cold-blooded killing by the Kid.

The matter went deeper than that, although the cold ruthlessness, the callousness of the slaying of a man and his defenseless wife was enough to make a man see red. But this affair had involvements, personal angles concerning the old sheriff which prodded him from all sides. It touched on his honor as a lawman, on his family, and on folks who had been his friends for the period of a whole lifetime.

That was why he was almost boiling with rage at his old friend, Judge Calloway Hardin. He had ridden the river with Cal Hardin too many times in the old days for the judge to have any idea of his being at fault. But Judge Hardin was talking, here in the sheriff's office, and old Bob didn't like what was being said.

The judge was trying to use reason. He sat on Bob's desk, running his fingers through his gray beard, clearly disliking what he was doing. But he was not a man who ever dodged an unpleasant duty.

"Yuh see how everybody feels," he was saying. "This little snot of a gunman who calls himself *El Muchacho*, the Kid, is yore own sister's son—"

"But that don't mean I ain't tried to get him," Old Bob snapped. "I'd get a murderer if he was my own son. And yuh ought to know it."

"It ain't me," Hardin protested, "it's the Board of Commissioners. There was some that thought you was too old before yuh was put up for election. But yuh've always said if there was a complaint yuh'd resign instead of waitin' to be kicked out of office at the next election."

"I still mean it," Bob said, "but I'm tellin' yuh, I still want to finish this job. I said publicly I'd get *El Muchacho*, and I mean to do it! I don't want to shoot him down—I want to see him hung."

"That's what folks can't believe. Yuh had him and his partner cornered, and what happens? Yuh killed his partner, but the Kid rides off again. Just like he's done after every killin' he's committed since he come back to these parts a year ago."

OLD Bob shifted uneasily in his chair, felt the pain of one of *El Muchacho's* deadly bullets in his still unhealed leg, another still buried under his ribs. He had the pair cornered, it was true, and *El Muchacho* had got away. But only because the sheriff had been so riddled full of holes that he couldn't crawl to the gun that had just been shot out of his hands in that fight.

"Just which one of the commissioners is particularly sore at me?" Old Bob asked wearily.

"Hank Blue, at the bank," Hardin answered. "Here it is Fiesta time tomorrow, and that means a week with the town full of strangers, and money flowing like water. He thinks it ain't safe for yuh to go on."

"I reckon he wants me to turn my job over to my deputy?"

The judge had a conciliatory tone now.

"I know yuh don't like Morgan Blue, and that yuh wouldn't have made him yore deputy if Hank hadn't used pressure. But Morgan's younger'n you, more modern in his ideas—"

The sheriff had reached the exploding point. He got to his feet with difficulty, due to his wounds, grabbed the judge by the coat lapels and shoved him down into the just vacated chair. Old Bob breathed heavily.

"Now listen here, yuh old dried-up horny-frog," he raged, "I been listenin' to a lot o' talk around here. Now it's my time, and yuh're gonna listen, like it or not. In the first place, I actually been tryin' to get my hands on that rapscallion that thinks he's the original Billy the Kid. Yuh know my sister ran off and married a worthless man that deserted her, takin' that kid with him, and that lucky for her she died of grief before it turned out how rotten that man was.

"Well, as for that kid, he ain't twenty-one yet, and he's killed at least a dozen men. He's lowdown mean and a cowardly killer, and I'd catch him up as quick as I would any other skunk, in spite of folks whisperin' that I'm lookin' the other way when he comes around."

The old sheriff stuck his finger almost in the judge's eye, and wiggled it there.

"But when I got on his trail," he continued, "I run into a whole lot more than him. I bumped into somethin' which, if my hunch is right, is gonna explode right under all our noses, and in a few hours!"

"Meanin' what?" Hardin demanded.

"Meanin' I ain't sayin' what—yet. It's so surprisin' to me that I can't hardly believe it yet. And I know blamed well that everybody else won't believe it. I may even be wrong, which is why I ain't opened up my trap and spoke my mind before this. Yuh ever knowed me to slack my duty, no matter how it hurt?"

"No, it ain't that—" Hardin began.

"How much stock yuh own in the Drover's Bank?" Bob broke in.

"Everything I got's in it, stock and deposit."

"Be broke if it was wiped out?"

"Shore, but what yuh gettin' at?"

"Just this—yuh're comin' along with me whenever I notify yuh, and yuh're gonna see me made the biggest fool in this corner of Texas, or else yuh're gonna eat yore words and buy me the finest Stetson out of Fort Worth. I'm tired of yuh old rannihans tryin' to ride herd on my job!"

IF old Judge Cal Hardin hadn't ridden the trail a long time ago with the sheriff, he might not have agreed to follow Bob into something which Bob would not explain to him. But they were both old-timers, and though they were both stubborn in what they thought was right, each knew that the other one was no fool.

The judge knew that he was not on a wild-goose chase, no matter how mysterious Bob was. And besides, he had a secret yen to feel a six-gun in his hands again, to get a touch of the old days when his activities were more than those of sitting in dignified silence on the bench.

And there was one other thing that drove him to hope that Bob had something up his sleeve. That was the recollection of the picture he had burned on his mind when they had gone to the house where the stage driver had lived. That was where *El Muchacho* had struck last.

He saw signs where *El Muchacho* had tortured his two victims with a hot iron, where the driver and his wife had put up a desperate fight to save the money bag and the driver had hidden on his premises while another driver had gone ahead as a decoy—to thwart *El Muchacho*. But the Kid had been too smart. He'd gotten the money, even though it meant murder.

These poor old folks had long been friends of the judge and of Sheriff Bob, whose nephew had committed the crime.

It was a week now since this last crime, and two days since the posse had come in without *El Muchacho*, but with the dead body of his partner, whom the sheriff had killed. And that made it two days since the commissioners had sent the judge to ask for old Bob's resignation, which he had refused.

Old Bob was still boiling inside, and worried, too. He hadn't told the judge very much of his suspicions, because they were merely suspicions, and he might be completely wrong. In which case, he knew he was through. Maybe worse. He would be branded with suspicion of not trying too hard to catch his nephew.

It was the night of the second day of the Fiesta, and Bob left the grounds early. He had kept an eye on the place while his deputy was left to guard the bank by day. This arrangement was preferable to old Hank Blue, who was the president of the bank and the uncle of the deputy. But Morgan Blue wouldn't be guarding the bank after dark.

Old Bob walked down the sidewalk in front of the busy stores and saloons and passed on into the darkness at the end of the street, where he skirted around to the back and came to the back door of the judge's house.

Judge Cal Hardin let him in without lighting the kitchen, and they went into the living room, where Bob got his first sight of his old riding

mate. Cal Hardin didn't look like a judge now.

Judge Hardin wore a pair of faded overalls, boots with one leg in and one out, and on his hip was the gun he had worn in the days of his hard-riding youth. And as he rubbed his short beard, there was a twinkle of excitement in his eyes. He poured two drinks.

"Bob Stubblefield," he said, "if yuh make a fool out of me tonight, I'll kill yuh and stretch yore hide on a barn door."

But he still knew nothing of the sheriff's suspicions.

"If I make a fool outa yuh, I'll be a worse one," Bob answered. "Cal, did yuh ever hear of a man robbin' his own bank?"

The judge's eyes opened, as though the sheriff had gone suddenly crazy.

"What do yuh mean?" he asked slowly.

"This is my hunch. Hank Blue, I happened to have learned in Fort Worth, has lost a fortune speculatin' in cattle. Right after I learned that,

[*Turn page*]

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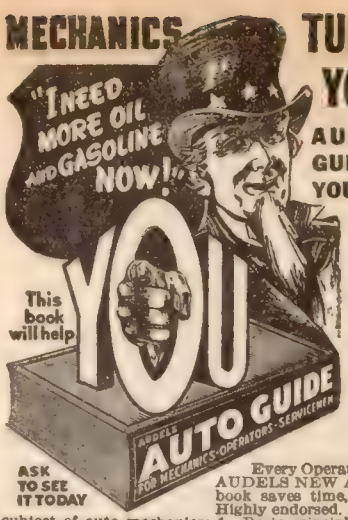

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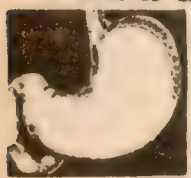

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he wanted his nephew made a deputy. And soon after that the Kid came into these parts. Now the bank's insured, and if it was robbed the insurance company has to make up the loss. And who could say how much *dinero* was stole? Only Hank. So the insurance company could—I say could—really be replacing what Hank lost and not what the outsiders stole."

THE judge was silent a long moment. Then he slowly said:

"Bob, either you or me is the biggest fool that ever lived. I don't believe any man of Hank Blue's status is capable of doin' a thing like that to his neighbors. I think that the things yuh've pieced together just happened that way, independent of each other."

"I might have, too, except for one thing," the sheriff reminded. "I happen to know my own deputy served time in prison at the same time that *El Muchacho* did, and that they were friends. Now he's publicly claimin' to be lookin' for him, but claimin' he don't know what the kid looks like. Therefore he's lyin'. Why?"

"I don't know." Hardin shrugged.

"And I can only risk my job by guessin'. But there's more *dinero* in that bank tonight, for the robbers' share, than there will be for another year. So, my reasoning is right or I'm through forever as a law officer. Ready to go with me?"

"Yep," the judge answered. "But remember what I said I'd do if yuh were wrong."

The sheriff and the judge, both old men, had been hiding in the dark of the back end of the restaurant building to the rear of the bank for nearly two hours. Cramped, uncomfortable, and unable to smoke or speak aloud, it was a trying and apparently hopeless period of waiting. "I feel like a fool," the judge whispered.

Bob Stubblefield felt more like one, though he did not say so. He had staked his whole reputation on what amounted to no more than a series of

[*Turn to page 120*]

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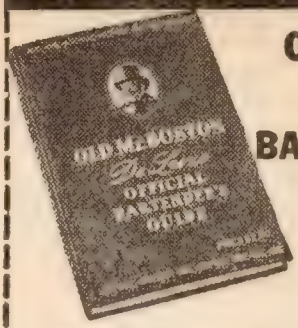

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circumstances, which, he admitted to himself, could mean nothing at all. But he was in it too far now. His whole career was hanging in the balance, and his reputation as well.

"Mebbe yuh'd rather go home—" he began.

"Quiet!" It was the judge himself who interrupted.

Nerves taut, they listened. Yes, there was the thump of horses' hoofs coming up the alley. Both men shrank back deeper into the shadows of the restaurant wall.

The horses came on in the darkness, slowly, quietly, as though their riders were careful to let them pick their way. And then they halted, not twenty feet from where Bob and the judge crouched in the darkness.

Bob heard muffled voices, one commanding, the others accepting the orders. Bob's spine tingled. He fingered his gun, and his hopes rose. Maybe he hadn't been such a fool after all.

The sheriff felt the old judge's fingers tighten on his arm, and he read the eager message. The old judge wanted to go out and grab them off. Bob gave him a sign to be patient. Wait and catch them in the act.

Bob kept the impatient old judge in check, while four dark shadows dismounted and worked a full ten silent minutes prying open the back door of the bank. Then he saw the men slip within the building.

"Now we got 'em," the judge whispered. "Let's go."

Still, Bob restrained him.

"We ain't got nothin' but bank robbers yet," he cautioned. "Just hold yore hosses."

Catching the bank robbers now would not prove Bob's point. He had a different plan.

"Wait till they come out," he ordered.

"Yuh want 'em to git away?" the excited old judge demanded.

"Almost," Bob answered. "Now let's get outside the door and pick 'em off as they come out with the loot."

The judge was on his feet instantly, and the pair of oldsters were quickly lined up beside the door, waiting with drawn guns.

Then Bob got another idea. He stepped out and drove the four waiting horses away. There would be no riding to safety for these men. The horses pranced out of sight down the dark alley, and Bob came back toward the door.

He did not reach it.

One of the robbers coming out with a laden feed bag saw his moving shadow. The man drew his gun, shouted and fired all in the same breath.

And then the alley became a bedlam of living gunfire, curses and yells. Yellow flashes of angry gunflame split the night. The old judge dropped his dignity, and his gun barked while he let out the old war cry of his youth.

"Up and at 'em, Bob! In that door!"

It was the judge's own gun that cut down the man who stood in the doorway. Then both old men, with their guns blazing, shot their way into the building which housed the three remaining desperate men, and closed the door behind them! There would be no running in this fight!

The outlaws met their rush with a savage burst of gunfire, and immediately split up so as not to be too close together, thereby making it tougher for their pursuers to locate them.

"Yee-ow!" the judge screeched, and threw a shot at an orange flame which blossomed from a darkened corner.

The roar of Forty-fives is deafening in a small building, and the smell of gunsmoke is choking to the nostrils.

[*Turn page*]

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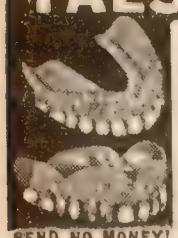

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But to two men present there it was music and perfume. The pair of old-time rannihans were reliving the days of their youth, perhaps for the last time. Their spines tingled and their muscles tightened with the elasticity of youth, and the thrill of a good fight filled their souls.

During a few sharp minutes the black interior of the Drovers' Bank was a hellish battlefield where the flames and the roar of guns mingled with the yells of men. Where the hollow walls were sounding boards which magnified the sounds a thousand times until the very darkness rocked and quivered. And where two old men became, for a short space of time, a pair of young hellions fighting the good fight.

And then there was a sudden silence, as stunning to the ears accustomed to the roar of battle, as the blasting rattle of guns had been. The battle had terminated with the abruptness of a summer shower.

Now it was dark in the bank, and silent, except for the groans of two dying men. Old Bob struck a match and lit the bracketed oil lamps on the wall.

The place was a shambles. Outside the rail which fenced in the president's desk and the lone teller's cage, chairs and desks were knocked over, blank checks and deposit slips littered the floor—with blood stains on them. A calendar lay on the floor. There was blood on it.

"Get the sack of money," Bob ordered old Cal, "and officially impound it, or something. But get it hid, and keep it hid till I tell yuh. That's our whole case."

"I don't understand?" the judge questioned.

"Never mind, just hide that money. Get out the back door. A crowd's gatherin'."

A new voice joined them, cold and sharp.

"No yuh don't!"

Old Bob turned, and his gun hand came up.

One of the still forms, huddled as though it had been dead in a shadowed

corner of the room had now come to life. *El Muchacho,* the Kid, sat up, his gun covering the judge and the sheriff!

Old Bob surveyed the renegade youth with a slow gaze, his gun hand frozen. The youth was unusually small, seeming hardly more than a schoolboy in his faded overalls with one leg stuffed into riding boots. He was tow-headed, his unruly, sun-bleached hair falling over cold, sullen blue eyes that glinted with icy hatred at the man who was his uncle.

"No yuh don't!" he snapped. "Drop that sack right in yore tracks and grab yore ears. Yuh two old fossils ain't so smart, alongside *El Muchacho.*"

There was a world of youthful egotism, turned rotten mean, in the way the hard-bitten youth rolled his self-imposed name off his tongue.

The Kid *had* tricked the old-timers, the old sheriff admitted to himself. There was blood on the Kid's shirt, and when the sheriff had seen him lying grotesquely in the corner, his right arm twisted under his body, Old Bob had assumed that he was dead.

The Kid's gun was weaving between the two men with a kind of jerky nervousness.

"Get them paws up!" he barked at the sheriff, as he crawled to his feet. "And turn around facing the wall."

Old Bob looked at the renegade youth contemptuously.

"Younker," he said, without obeying the command, "yuh're on the wrong track. Put yore gun up and surrender, if yuh got any gumption."

A cold sneer cut the youth's hard face. He was facing his uncle now, hardly half a dozen paces from him. He had glanced out the window and seen that there was a crowd gathered across the street, trying to safely witness the drama within the bank by its dim oil lamps. The Kid saw that he had an audience, and he jerked his belt up with his left hand and squared his shoulders.

"I didn't come here to surrender," he said coldly. "I came to do two

[*Turn page*]

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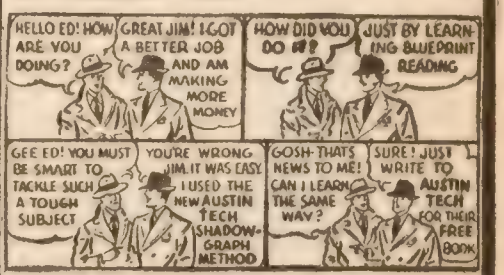
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jobs, and I'm doin' 'em both. To rob this bank and to kill yuh for killin' my partner last week."

The sheriff's gun was still in his hand, which he had not raised, but the Kid's gun was bearing on him.

"I'm arrestin' yuh here and now," old Bob said easily. "If yuh want to come peaceable—"

"Yuh old fool!" the Kid snarled. "I hated yore guts all my life, and I just been waitin' for this minute!"

Old Bob saw the Kid's muscles tighten in what was a warning to him. He saw the gun steady in the youth's clutch, even heard the roar of the weapon before he fired. The Kid had fired first, but Bob's gun roared before the echo of the Kid's gun died.

Old Bob felt a hot, searing flame in his belly as he saw the Kid fall, and he knew the Kid had shot him in the guts, to let him die slowly and painfully.

But even then, old Bob had not lifted his gun higher than the Kid's knees, and his bullet had shattered the bone in *El Muchacho's* kneecap. That was the important thing to old Bob. The Kid's horse was out of reach. Bob had seen to that. And now the Kid couldn't walk. He was taken, captured at last, alive to hang.

The fire in Bob's guts was a living agony, and he felt himself getting weaker. He staggered as he went toward the Kid, who was floundering on the floor. But he kept his gun trained on him until he sank beside *El Muchacho* and, too weak to stand, took his gun from him. Then he called to the judge.

"Listen here," he said. "Drag me over out of the Kid's hearing. I got to talk fast."

Old Cal dragged him across the room and squatted beside him.

"Now," old Bob said, "yuh keep that money till Hank Blue announces how much is missin'. Then yuh count this, and I'm bettin' he'll show a difference of a hundred thousand. That's what I figger he's stole himself, and intends to lay on this robbery. That's all yuh need to call in the State Bank

Examiners for an audit. And get this murderin' nephew of mine to safe-keepin'. I might not be here—"

"Shut up, yuh old horny frog," the judge broke in. "No piece of lead that small is gonna rub yuh out." But Hardin wasn't trying to fool himself when he said it, for old Bob's voice was now hardly more than a whisper, and the judge knew what gut wounds were.

"I'd like to live to see the bunch of 'em hang—" Old Bob didn't finish, but gradually lost his senses. . . .

BUT the judge was right. In two weeks Bob was again conscious, and the lead slug had surrendered to the doctor's probing. Old Bob was going to live. Judge Hardin came to tell him that, and he was grinning.

"You and me's still in the saddle," he opined. "And I got Hank and Morgan Blue in jail with warrants against 'em. The examiners say the bank won't have to close, and yuh know what?"

"No, except I got the belly ache," Bob said. "What's on yore mind?"

"That yellow little killer has confessed and is gonna turn State's evidence again the Blues, claimin' it was Hank and Morgan that ribbed him up to rob the bank. The kid ain't got but one leg now, and he'll be safe in prison the rest of his days. And folks, hearin' the whole story from me, has decided they want yuh to keep yore badge for life."

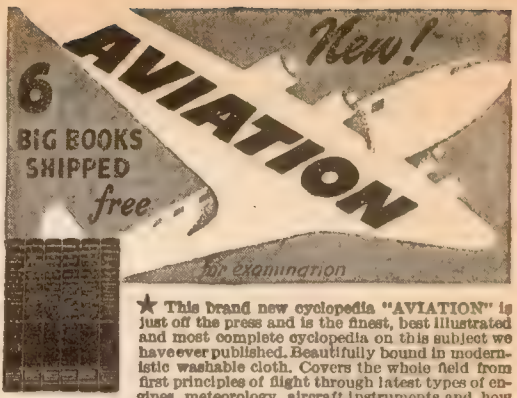
Old Bob, lying under the white sheets, studied the judge a moment.

"Reckon yuh could keep yore mouth if I should tell yuh somethin'?"

"I ain't known as a talker," the judge flared.

"Well, truth is, I never could figger out how I was gonna have the guts to pull the rope on that kid's neck, lowdown as he was. I reckon I shouldn't have tried to keep my badge."

"That just shows yuh're still outa yore head," the judge said quickly. "Don't let nobody hear yuh say that. Somebody might believe yuh."



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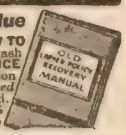

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 11)

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Steer Roping

New Mexico has turned back the pages of history a quarter of a century so far as cowboy sport is concerned, and the hands have gone back to steer roping contests in a big way. Ropers like Bob Crosby, Floyd Gale and others took the spotlight once held by Clay McGonigal, Joe Gardner, J. Ellison Carroll and others.

Carl B. Livingston, old-time cowhand now connected with the New Mexico Oil Conservation commission at Santa Fe, has a clipping of a rodeo (then called riding and roping contest) held at Pecos, Texas, in 1883, which is claimed to be one of the first such contests held in America.

Tulk and Spence Joel, who took a bunch of hands to South America in 1905, and who promoted a number of riding and roping contests in the land of the Gaucho, are now living in New Mexico. Red Driver, another old-time cowboy, who was prominent in wild west circles a quarter of a century ago, and also Mrs. McGonigal, widow of the late Clay McGonigal, who was one of the most famous of the top hands of twenty-five years ago, also make their home in New Mexico.

The Sun Valley, Idaho, rodeo, August 16th and 17th, went over in great shape, being a fast, snappy performance with plenty of thrills and a huge attendance. Robert J. Miles is president, Mary Ellen Nash, secretary, D. L. (Spike) Speckman, arena director. Judges are Harry Knight, Breezy Cox and Turk Greenough. Timers, Ava Colburn and Pete Kerscher, announcer, Jack Story.

Contracted performers were: Clowns, Homer Holcomb and Jazbo Fulkerson; Trick riders, Alice Nesbitt, Buff Brady, Jr., Dick Griffith, Bernice Taylor, Fay Knight, and Bob Rooker. Fancy ropers were Bob Rooker and Buff Brady, Jr. The stock was furnished by J. C. Sorenson, and the winner of the title of best bucking horse was "No Doze."

The final results, in bronc riding were: First—Nick Knight; Second—Bill McMacken; Third—Jackie Cooper; Fourth—Johnnie Tubbs. In the bull riding, Dick Griffith outrode the field to first place, Bob Estes was second, Fritz Becker, third, and Frank Marshall, fourth.

In the calf roping, Breezy Cox breezed home with the bacon, winning first prize. Oran Fore was second, Harry Hart, third, and Earl Moore, fourth. Bud Spillsbury won the steer wrestling, Hugh Clingman

was second, Clay Carr, third, and Earl Moore placed fourth in this event also.

Rodeo Fans Convention

The Rodeo Fans of America will hold their first annual convention in New York, October 18th and 19th. The delegates will attend a banquet at one of the leading hotels and will attend the Madison Square Garden rodeo in a body. The Fans were organized in February of this year and now have quite a membership.

Dr. Leo Brady of Endicott, New York, is president of the organization. Its purpose is purely social among those who are ardent fans of cowboy sport.

Homesteaders Night

About 16,000 people attended the Homesteaders Night Rodeo at Caldwell, Idaho, August 7th, 8th and 9th. The president is Aubrey Cooper; secretary, Charles Laurenson; arena director, J. C. Sorenson; timer, Hariett McMacken; judges, Harry Hart and Breezy Cox; announcer, Pete Kerscher.

Contracted performers were: Clowns, Jazbo Fulkerson and Homer Holcomb; trick riders, Dick Griffith, Bernice Taylor, Buff Brady, Jr., and Alice Nesbitt. Buff Brady, Jr., also was contracted to do fancy roping. The stock was furnished by J. C. Sorensen, and the winner of the title of best bucking horse of the show was "Smuggler."

Final results in bronc riding: First—Bill McMacken; Second—Eddy Jones; Third—Walt Heacock; Fourth—Sonny Tureman. In bull riding Dick Griffith was the only contestant to go through the finals without being bucked off. In calf roping, Clay Carr was first and Breezy Cox, second, Harry Hart, third, and Sam Fancher, fourth. In the steer wrestling, Harry Hart took first prize, Hugh Clingman, second, Dan Poore, third, and Frank Van Meter, fourth.

[*Turn page*]

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Colorado Springs Show

An estimated 43,000 attended the Colorado Springs Rodeo, August 14th to 17th. C. L. Tutt is president, Willard Hanes, secretary, Leo J. Cremer, arena director, Ralph Stanton and Burel Mulkey, judges. Timers are Doff Aber and Alice Gordon, announcer, Cy Taillon.

Contracted performers were: Clown, George Mills; Trick Riders, Polly Mills, Verne and Myrtle Goodrich, Don and Virginia Wilcox; Fancy Ropers, Verne Goodrich, Don Wilcox, and Ray Berwick. Stock was furnished by Leo. J. Cremer.

Final results in bronc riding: First—Paul Carney; Second—Doff Aber; Third—Bill Sievers; Fourth—Alvin Gordon. In the bull riding, Buttons Yonnick was first, Gerald Roberts, second, Smokey Snyder, third, and Buck Kilough, fourth.

Buck Echols won the calf roping, with Leo Huff placing second, Jack Skipworth was third and Tony Salinas, fourth. In the steer wrestling, Homer Pettigrew beat the field to first place with Hugh Bennett second, Mickey McCrory, third and Dub Phillips, fourth.

Hot Off the Wire

As the old cowhand would say, the mail man has just galloped off with the monthly mail and in that mail is a letter from Carl B. Livingston, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, enclosing a photostatic copy of the clipping referred to about the first rodeo, so waddies, here are some rodeo results hot off the wire, at least they should be hot, as they have had fifty-eight years to get that way.

From the clipping, and as the radio announcers say: "I quote":

"Pecos, Texas, July 4th, 1883—Something new was started in this little cowtown today, something previously unheard-of—a planned "cowboy contest" with cash prizes, barbecue and everything.

"Morgan Livingston, top-hand of the NA ranch, made the best time in the steer roping, held in the south part of the town near the courthouse. Trav Windham, boss of the Lazy Y's, drew second place. Cash prizes were $25 for first and $15 for second place.

"This settles an argument that has been

Editor WEST

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going around for the past several months as to which ranch had the best ropers, Jim Manning, Fate Beard, George Brookshire, Jim Slack, Henry Slack and Howard Collier, represented the Hashknife ranch; Jeff Chism and Henry Miller rode for the W ranch; Trav Windham for the Lazy Y; Morgan and Jim Livingston were in town rooting for the NA ranch."

So there you are, waddies, results of a rodeo away back about the time the sheriff one night in one of the saloons in Pecos told the cowboys that he would not stand for any shooting scrapes in the saloon that night, because his asthma was bothering him and the smell of gun-powder smoke made it worse.

Guess it is about time now to throw the left-over grub to the coyotes and get the old Chuck Wagon rolling along; will be seeing you again in a couple of moons, and until then, *Adios!*

—FOG HORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HOLA, pals of the open range! Now that we've all enjoyed Fog Horn's palaver, let's get off by ourselves for a little pow-wow about the next issue. Right off I want to say it will be a rip-snorter from cover to cover—a number you'll enjoy thoroughly.

The featured novel will be THE BORDER BRAND, by Larry A. Harris, a swift-moving, action-packed epic of the West in the days when Pancho Villa led his Villistas on raids covering a wide territory.

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In addition, other stories and another swell chat with Fog Horn.

Everybody—write in and tell us what you think of the magazine. Address The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. A postcard will do—but please write! We're grateful for each and every letter received. And a knock's as welcome as a boost.

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So long—see you next issue.

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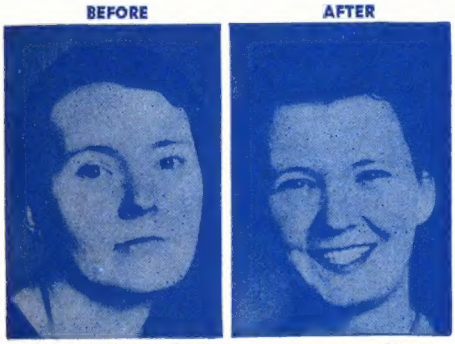

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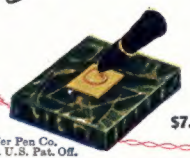

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